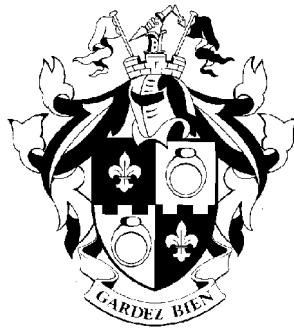


TRUANCY IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY



OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT
REPORT NUMBER 2010-7

MARCH 2, 2010

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Overview

In Maryland, all children between the ages of 5 and 16 must attend school. State regulation defines excused or “lawful” absences, and absence for any other reason is presumed to be unexcused or “unlawful.” A student absent for an unexcused reason is “truant.” A student with unexcused absences amounting to 20 percent or more of the semester (18 days) or school year (36 days) is “habitually truant.”

Research links truancy to dropping out of school, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and other risky behaviors. This report by the Office of Legislative Oversight responds to the County Council’s request to examine: (1) the magnitude of truancy in Montgomery County Public Schools; (2) how agencies in the County work together to address truancy; and (3) research-based best practices for reducing truancy.

OLO’s review found that relatively few County students are habitually truant (less than one percent). OLO also found that current County practices partially align with best practices for reducing truancy. The issues recommended for Council discussion with agency representatives include: the attendance threshold for responding to individual students’ truancy; opportunities for increased collaboration among County agencies; and the value of formally evaluating County efforts to reduce truancy.

Habitual Truancy Rates in Montgomery County

The Maryland State Department of Education requires all local schools systems, including Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), to report habitual truancy data for students enrolled in the same school for at least 91 days of the school year.

In 2009, less than one percent of all MCPS students (984 students) were habitually truant; two-thirds of habitual truants were in high school (627 students). This compares to seven percent of MCPS students (8,637 students) who were chronically absent because they missed 20 or more days of school for excused *or* unexcused reasons. Between 2006 and 2009, habitual truancy rates in MCPS declined by five percent and rates of chronic absenteeism declined by 17 percent.

MCPS does not collect demographic data on habitual truants. Demographic data on chronic absenteeism and on five other measures that either contribute to or result from truancy (“correlates of truancy”) suggest that habitually truant students are disproportionately black, Latino, male, enrolled in special education, receive free or reduced priced meals, or are English language learners. The five correlates of truancy are:

- Out-of-school suspensions;
- Loss of credit in the first semester of 9th grade;
- Academic ineligibility to participate in extracurricular activities in high school;
- Grade retention in high school (i.e., too few credits earned to advance to the next grade); and
- Dropping out of high school.

Sanctions for Truancy in Montgomery County

State law enables the criminal prosecution of parents, guardians, and adults who encourage or permit truancy, but not students. Since 2005, the State’s Attorney’s Office has prosecuted 55 parents and guardians for truancy; this equates to about one percent of all truancy cases. Penalties can include fines up to \$500 or jail time. State law does not allow law enforcement to pick up students based on truancy and return them to school. State law allows the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) to petition the courts to declare truant students to be Children in Need of Supervision (CINS). However, CINS petitions for truancy are not filed by DJS in Montgomery County and are utilized infrequently across the state.

Truancy Risk Factors and Consequences

Research indicates that school absence frequently is an indicator of challenges occurring among students and within families, schools, and communities. These factors can undermine student engagement, which is the connectedness or attachment that students feel toward school. The table below offers some examples.

Type of Challenge	Factors Related to Truancy
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor academic performance (sometimes due to special education needs)• A lack of vision of education as a means to achieve goals• Unmet mental health, alcohol, drug use, or abuse needs
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of effective attendance policies• “Push-out” policies (e.g., automatic failing grade for poor attendance)• Unsafe environments
Home and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Abuse or neglect• Safety issues near home or school• Parental substance abuse

Source: National Center for Student Engagement

Research also indicates that truancy is both a cause and a consequence of many troubling behaviors, including dropping out of high school, high school expulsion, substance use, juvenile delinquency, weapon-related violence, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and becoming sexually active at a young age.

Summary of Best Practices

The following five best practices emerge from OLO’s review of the research literature on effective truancy reduction and dropout prevention programs:

- **Interagency collaboration** among schools, families, and community service agencies – including law enforcement, social services agencies, and mental health organizations – to address personal, academic, school climate, and family-related factors that contribute to truant behavior.
- **Use of data to target programs** to students at highest risk for becoming truant, including a review of data on student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement to ensure that effective interventions are targeted to students most at risk.
- **School policies that promote attendance** and student attachment by having schools:
 - a. Implement effective attendance policies and apply them consistently;
 - b. Notify parents when absences occur;
 - c. Establish welcoming and safe school environments;
 - d. Eliminate “push-out policies” such as suspensions for truancy; and
 - e. Ensure that teachers respect and support all students.
- **A comprehensive approach** that focuses on prevention and intervention through (1) school-wide efforts to prevent truancy, (2) targeted initiatives to improve attendance among chronically absent students, and (3) intensive interventions to improve the attendance of habitually truant students.
- **Program evaluation** that includes the use of performance measures for programs and students and the monitoring of these measures to identify opportunities for program improvement and to ensure that truancy programs work as intended.

Montgomery County Practices

Representatives from the following agencies participate on the County’s Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB) to address truancy issues in Montgomery County:

- Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)
- Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- Montgomery County Police Department
- Montgomery County State’s Attorney’s Office (SAO)
- Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County; and
- Maryland Department of Juvenile Services

MCPS serves as the lead County agency for addressing truancy. Unlike the other five agencies on the ITRB, MCPS tracks data, designs, and implements specific strategies aimed at reducing truancy. MCPS also manages the cases of all truant students in the County, including those referred to the ITRB.

MCPS’ truancy practices – in partnership with other County agencies – include informal collaborations with DHHS to address the root causes of truancy (e.g., referrals for mental health services) and convening the ITRB to address the most difficult habitual truancy cases. In 2009, 43 students were referred to the ITRB – representing four percent of all habitual truancy cases. Most students (74%) improved their attendance after the hearing, but nearly half (49%) remained chronically absent or habitually truant following their hearing.

Alignment between Local and Best Practices

OLO found that County practices partially align with best practices to curb truancy. The chart below summarizes the alignment between five best practices and current County practices.

Best Practice	Montgomery County Practices	Alignment
Interagency Collaboration	Informal collaboration between MCPS and the Executive Branch occurs on a case-by-case basis to address the root causes of truancy. The Interagency Truancy Review Board is the only formal interagency activity explicitly designed to address truancy.	Partially aligned
Use of Data to Target Programs	MCPS uses attendance data to identify students in need of truancy interventions. However, research suggests also using behavior and achievement data in addition to attendance data to target truancy reduction and dropout prevention programs.	Partially aligned
School Policies to Promote Attendance	MCPS promotes student attendance through positive behavior supports, fostering awareness of its attendance policies, and after-school programs. However, some policies that impose sanctions for truancy may work at cross purposes to school efforts to re-engage students and improve their attendance.	Partially aligned
Comprehensive Approach	MCPS’ approach to providing school-wide, targeted, and intensive interventions according to student need aligns with best practice. The intensity and timing of targeted and intensive interventions, however, lags behind best practices for increasing the attendance of truant students.	Partially aligned
Program Evaluation	With the exception of the ITRB, MCPS has neither evaluated nor established performance measures for its truancy reduction programs. MCPS has begun to collect data that will enable an evaluation of its truancy reduction programs in the future.	Not aligned

Recommended Discussion Issues

To help address gaps in Montgomery County's overall approach to reducing truancy, OLO offers four recommended issues for discussion between and among the County Council and agency representatives.

Issue #1: The merits and drawbacks to lowering the threshold for "habitual truancy" in MCPS and using factors other than attendance to identify students in need of truancy interventions.

- a. Has MCPS ever considered adopting a threshold for habitual truancy that is lower than the State's definition – that is, student with unexcused absences 20 percent or more of the time?
- b. What are the arguments for and against identifying students at-risk for habitual truancy based on factors other than attendance, such as academic achievement and behavior?
- c. How do/could MCPS' efforts to reduce its loss of credit rates in high school square with efforts to identify and address the needs of students at highest risk for truancy?

Issue #2: Identifying additional opportunities for systemic collaboration across agencies to address truancy exist.

- a. Are there ways to use the Interagency Truancy Review Board as a forum for increased collaboration among the participating agencies to address truancy?
- b. What sorts of programs or strategies are best implemented across agencies?
- c. If/ when additional resources become available, what would be your agency's highest priority strategies or programs to implement to increase school attendance?

Issue #3: Opportunities for enhancing incentives for truant students to attend school regularly.

- a. Are there ways to expand access to MCPS' career technology programs, including Edison, to chronically absent or truant students?
- b. To what extent do MCPS' Level 1 and 2 alternative programs address truancy? How successful have these programs been at increasing attendance among truant students?
- c. Are there ways to expand access to the Level 1 and 2 alternative programs to meet the needs of chronically absent or truant students?

Issue #4: The value of evaluating the effectiveness of the County's truancy programs.

- a. How does MCPS currently assess the effectiveness of its efforts to prevent and/or reduce truancy?
- b. In what ways could a district-wide evaluation of MCPS' truancy reduction efforts inform the school system's dropout prevention efforts?
- c. How feasible would it be to develop County-wide performance goals across agencies for truancy programs and develop a plan for conducting a formal evaluation of program effectiveness?

<p>For a complete copy of OLO Report 2010-7, go to: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo. This document is available in alternative formats upon request.</p>

OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE REPORT 2010-7

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Chapter I: Authority, Scope, and Organization of Report

A. Authority

Council Resolution 16-1407, *FY 2010 Work Program for Office of Legislative Oversight*, adopted July 21, 2009.

B. Purpose and Scope

Preventing and reducing student truancy (students missing school for unexcused reasons) is a challenge in communities across the nation, including Montgomery County. Research links truancy to dropping out of school, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and other risky behaviors.

Short-term costs of truancy include academic failure, agency expenditures to address root causes of truancy, and court costs associated with juvenile crime and prosecutions of truancy-related cases. Long-term costs of truancy include lower incomes, increases in adult crime, lower tax revenues, and social service expenditures. The RAND Corporation has estimated that the cumulative cost of truancy when it leads to dropping out of school is more than \$200,000 per dropout in social programs and criminal justice expenses over the course of his or her lifetime.¹

Given the consequences of truancy, public schools systems, social services agencies, law enforcement, courts, prosecutors, housing authorities, and juvenile service agencies each have a compelling interest to reduce truancy. The Council assigned OLO this project to gauge the magnitude of student truancy in the County and to better understand how public agencies across the County work together to address truancy. This report also describes “best practices” for reducing truancy and examples of other jurisdictions’ efforts to address truancy.

C. Organization of Report

Chapter II, School Attendance Laws, Regulations, and Policies, describes school attendance requirements in Maryland state law and regulations, Maryland state law governing Children in Need of Supervision, and MCPS attendance policies and regulations.

Chapter III, Truancy Risk Factors and Consequences, describes root causes of and risk factors that contribute to truancy, and the short- and long-term consequences of truancy.

Chapter IV, Scope of the Truancy Problem, describes challenges in compiling truancy data, variations in state definitions of truancy, and the scope of truancy within Maryland and Montgomery County.

Chapter V, Montgomery County Practices for Reducing Truancy, describes MCPS’ efforts to reduce truancy, interagency efforts to reduce truancy, and how member agencies of the Interagency Truancy Review Board interact with and provide services to truant students and their families outside of the Board.

Chapter VI, Maryland Practices for Reducing Truancy, describes state-wide efforts to reduce truancy and local truancy programs and practices in other Maryland counties.

¹ Vernez, G., Krop, R.A & Rydell, C.P., 1999

Chapter VII, Best Practices for Reducing Truancy, summarizes the research literature on best practices for reducing truancy and describes how Montgomery County's current practices align with identified best practices.

Chapters VIII and IX presents the Office of Legislative Oversight's **Findings** and **Recommended Discussion Issues**.

Chapter X, Agency Comments, contains Montgomery County Public Schools', the Executive Branch's, and other agencies' comments on the final draft of this report.

D. Methodology

Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) staff members Elaine Bonner-Tompkins and Leslie Rubin conducted this study, with assistance from Teri Busch. OLO gathered information through document reviews, data analysis, and interviews with staff from the following agencies represented on the County's Interagency Truancy Review Board:

- Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS);
- Montgomery County Departments of Health and Human Services (DHHS);
- Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD);
- The Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office (SAO);
- The Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC); and
- The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS).

OLO also gathered, reviewed, and synthesized information from a variety of published reports on truancy reduction and dropout prevention to identify best practices for addressing truancy and practices used in other Maryland jurisdictions.

OLO interviews with MCPS were conducted with staff from the Department of Student Services, the Office of Shared Accountability, Northwood High School, and Shady Grove Middle School. OLO interviews with the Department of Health and Human Services were conducted with staff from Child Welfare Services; Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Positive Youth Development; Juvenile Justice Services; Linkages to Learning; and School Health Services. OLO interviews with MCPD were conducted with staff from the Field Services Bureau and the Family Services Division.

OLO gathered available published and unpublished data from each agency to describe the scope of truancy and correlate measures of truancy, including trends in high school dropout, juvenile arrests, and truancy-related Child in Need of Supervision (CINS) petitions filed in Montgomery County by the Department of Juvenile Services. We utilized the most up-to-date data available. For MCPS, this included 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school year data for most measures, while for the other agencies this included fiscal year 2008 data from many sources. The percent calculations reported in this report do not always add to 100 due to rounding.

E. Acknowledgements

OLO received a high level of cooperation from everyone involved in this study. OLO appreciates the information shared and insights provided by all who participated. OLO would like to acknowledge:

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Mr. Stephen Zagami and Mr. Steve Neff, Department of Student Services
- Ms. Stephanie Williams and Ms. Marianne Erickson, Office of Shared Accountability
- Dr. Henry Johnson and Staff, Northwood High School
- Mr. Edward Owusu and Staff, Shady Grove Middle School

MONTGOMERY COUNTY STATE'S ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

- Mr. John McCarthy
- Mr. George Simms

MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

- Ms. Kate Garvey, Children, Youth and Family Services
- Ms. Monica Martin, Linkages to Learning
- Ms. Judy Covich and Ms. Mindy McMartin, Public Health Services
- Mr. Luis Cardona, Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Positive Youth Development
- Mr. Ron Rivlin, Juvenile Justice Services
- Ms. Sheila Dennis and Ms. Denyse Fredriksson, Child Welfare Services

MONTGOMERY COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT

- Assistant Chief Betsy Davis
- Sgt. James Collins
- Officer Maureen Connelly
- Officer Robert Cook
- Officer Suzanne Harrell
- Officer Gary Turner
- Officer Russell Larson
- Ms. Angela Lindsay
- Officer Joseph Lowery
- Officer John Witherspoon

MONTGOMERY COUNTY HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

- Ms. Lillian Durham
- Mr. Eugene Spencer
- Mr. Les Kaplan

MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE SERVICES

- Mr. Frank Duncan
- Dr. Lakshmi Iyengar
- Mr. Dennis Nial

MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY

- Ms. Alyssa Sanders, Linkage to Learning

Chapter II: School Attendance Laws, Regulations, and Policies

School attendance requirements for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) students are established in Maryland state law and regulations and MCPS policies and regulations. This chapter reviews and summarizes these laws, policies, and regulations. It is organized as follows:

- **Part A, State Laws and Regulations**, summarizes Maryland laws that govern public school attendance; and
- **Part B, MCPS Policies and Regulations**, summarizes MCPS' policies and regulations on student attendance.

A. State Laws and Regulations

With some limited exceptions, Maryland state law requires all children over five years old and under 16 years old to attend public school.¹ “[E]ach person who has legal custody or care and control of a child” – i.e., parents and guardians – has legal responsibility for ensuring that a child attends school.²

Truant Students. A student in Maryland is “truant” if the student is absent from school (for all or part of a day) for an “unlawful” reason.³ A state regulation lists the situations when a child’s absence from school is excused (or “lawful”).⁴ Absence for any reason except those listed in the regulation is presumed to be unexcused (or “unlawful”).⁵

A child’s absence from school is excused for:

- Death in the immediate family;⁶
- Student illness;
- Court summons;
- Hazardous weather conditions;
- Work approved or sponsored by the school, school system, or the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE);
- Observance of a religious holiday;
- State emergencies;
- Suspension;
- Lack of authorized transportation; or
- Other emergencies or circumstances accepted by the superintendent or a designee as “a good and sufficient cause for absence from school.”⁷

By law, schools must keep daily attendance records for each student.⁸ State law also requires principals or head teachers to report to their county superintendent or other officials when a student is absent or attends school irregularly without a lawful excuse.⁹

¹ See Annotated Code of Maryland, Education, § 7-301(a); see also *ibid.* § 7-301(d); Code of Maryland Regulations § 13A.08.01.01(A) [hereinafter “COMAR”].

² Annotated Code of Maryland, Education, § 7-301(c).

³ COMAR § 13A.08.01.04(B).

⁴ *Ibid.* § 13A.08.01.03.

⁵ *Ibid.* § 13A.08.01.04(A).

⁶ Local school systems may determine the relationships that constitute “immediate family.” *Ibid.* § 13A.08.01.03(A).

⁷ *Ibid.* § 13A.08.01.04(A).

⁸ COMAR § 13A.08.01.01(E).

⁹ *Ibid.* § 7-302(a).

Habitually Truant Students. A student is referred to as a “habitual truant” when the student is unlawfully absent from school for 20 percent or more of the school days (or portions of days) in any marking period, semester, or year.¹⁰ According to Maryland regulations, a school system may define “habitual truancy in a more but not less stringent manner” than the state definition.¹¹

At the end of each year, MCPS must report information about the number of habitually truant students to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).¹² MSDE, in turn, publicly reports this information annually in a report entitled *Habitual Truants, Maryland Public Schools*. See Chapter 4 at page 18 for a discussion of the number of habitually truant MCPS students.

Penalties for Truancy. Neither state nor local law imposes criminal penalties on students for truancy. In the vast majority of cases, Montgomery County police officers cannot stop or detain students who they find out of school during a school day simply because they are not in school.¹³ State law, however, imposes misdemeanor criminal penalties on people who encourage a child to or help a child miss school without a valid excuse and on parents or guardians who do not ensure that their child attends school. State law also allows a court to classify a child as a “Child in Need of Supervision” (CINS) for truancy.

A person who encourages a child to or helps a child miss school can be fined up to \$500 and/or put in jail for up to 30 days.¹⁴ A parent or guardian who “fails to see that [a] child attends school”¹⁵ can be fined up to \$50 per day and/or put in jail for up to 10 days for a first conviction (with a fine up to \$100 per day and/or jail for up to 30 days for a second or subsequent conviction).¹⁶

Two State laws address non-criminal penalties for students’ attendance. First, a student under the age of 16 cannot receive a learner’s instructional permit for driving if the student has more than 10 unexcused absences in the semester prior to applying for the permit.¹⁷ Students must provide a certified copy of attendance records when applying for a permit.¹⁸

The second law does not impose a penalty for attendance-related issues, rather it prohibits penalties. A law that took effect in July 2009 prohibits schools from suspending students out-of-school or expelling students solely for attendance-related reasons.¹⁹ According to MSDE, 787 MCPS students received out-of-school suspension for attendance offenses in 2008.²⁰

¹⁰ COMAR § 13A.08.01.04(C).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Annotated Code of Maryland, Education, § 7-304(f).

¹³ Under state law, a police officer can *only* take a child into custody under four circumstances: 1) pursuant to a court order, 2) if the officer is arresting the child, 3) if there are “reasonable grounds to believe that the child is in immediate danger . . . and removal is necessary for the child’s protection,” or 4) if there are “reasonable grounds to believe that the child has run away” Annotated Code of Maryland, Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 3-8A-14(a).

¹⁴ Annotated Code of Maryland, Education, § 7-301(e)(1).

¹⁵ Ibid. § 7-301(e).

¹⁶ Ibid. § 7-301(e)(2).

¹⁷ Annotated Code of Maryland, Transportation, § 16-105(a)(3). Note that in Maryland, a student cannot receive a learner’s instructional permit until the student is 15 years and 9 months old. See Ibid. § 16-103(c). Consequently, the prohibition on receiving a learner’s permit for too many absences only applies to students for three months – from when they are 15 years and 9 months old until they turn 16.

¹⁸ Ibid. § 16-105(a)(3).

¹⁹ Annotated Code of Maryland, Education, § 7-305(b).

²⁰ *Maryland Public School Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category, Combined In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions*, MSDE.

While the State cannot criminally prosecute a student for truancy, a habitually truant student can be classified by a State Circuit Court (sitting as a Juvenile Court) as a “Child in Need of Supervision” or CINS.²¹ CINS cases originate with a complaint to the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, where an intake officer receives complaints from individuals, agency personnel, or police officers.²²

Upon receiving a complaint alleging that a student is habitually truant and a child in need of supervision, the intake officer conducts a review of the allegations and either: 1) authorizes the filing of a petition in court to have the student adjudicated as a Child in Need of Supervision; 2) proposes an informal resolution to the case; or 3) does not authorize the filing of a CINS petition.²³ If a court finds that a habitually truant student is a Child in Need of Supervision, the court may impose a variety of consequences, including placing the student on probation, transferring custody or guardianship of the student, placing the student in the custody of the Department of Juvenile Services, and/or adopting a plan for the student to receive treatment services.²⁴

Mandated Programs to Address Habitual Truancy. If an individual school has a habitual truancy rate that exceeds standards established in State law, the local Board of Education must require that school to implement a Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) program designed to “use positive, effective practices to create learning environments where teachers can teach and students can learn.”²⁵

The table below lists the State-established thresholds for determining whether a school must implement a PBIS program to address habitual truancy.

Table 2-1. Maryland Threshold for Schools to Establish PBIS Programs due to Truancy

School Year	Program Required if Habitual Truancy Rate Exceeds:*
2008-2009	8%
2009-2010	6%
2010-2011	4%
2011-2012	2%
2012-2013 and beyond	1%

* Percent of enrolled students.

Source: Annotated Code of Maryland, Education , § 7-304.1(c)(2)

B. MCPS Policies and Regulations

In MCPS, both central-office staff and school-based staff share responsibility for overseeing and implementing student attendance policies and procedures. MCPS policies and regulations form the basis for attendance policies. Relevant policies and procedures include:

²¹ Annotated Code of Maryland, Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 3-8A-03; -18; -19.

²² Ibid. § 3-8A-10(b).

²³ Ibid. § 3-8A-10(c)(3).

²⁴ Ibid. § 3-8A-19(d).

²⁵ Annotated Code of Maryland, Education, § 7-304.1(c).

- Regulation JEA-RA, *Student Attendance*;
- Regulation JFA-RA, *Student Rights and Responsibilities*;
- Regulation IQB-RA, *Extracurricular Activities*; and
- Policy IED, *Framework and Structure of High School Education*.

Attendance. MCPS' *Student Attendance* regulation establishes procedures for recording student absences and for distinguishing between lawful and unlawful absences. While the regulation specifies that classroom teachers are responsible for taking student attendance, it delegates responsibility for establishing a procedure to follow-up on student absences to school principals.²⁶

Student Attendance lists the same 10 reasons for a lawful absence as listed in State law (see page 4 above). MCPS' policy also gives discretion to principals (or designees) to designate other absences for other reasons as lawful.²⁷

Each teacher is responsible for recording student attendance in class. The regulation requires teachers at the elementary and middle school levels to record attendance on class rosters generated weekly by a school, and then returned to a school's attendance secretary for entry into a web-based attendance system. At the high school level, teachers must record attendance directly into the web-based attendance system.²⁸ MCPS' Online Administrative Student Information System (OASIS) maintains student attendance records electronically.²⁹

For an excused absence, parents or guardians must explain the reason for a student's absence in a written note sent to the school no later than three days after the absence.³⁰ Otherwise, a school will classify the absence as "unlawful."³¹

Excessive Absences. The *Student Attendance* regulation gives principals discretion to refer students with "excessive absences and/or tardies" for "intensive interventions designed to increase regular attendance."³² Students with "excessive absences" are those who have been absent 10 days by the end of the second quarter of school.³³ At the same time, however, while regulations require teachers to help students with excused absences make up work, teachers have no obligation to help students with unlawful absences make up missed work:

Students have a responsibility to make up work regardless of the reason for absence. When the absence is an excused one, the teacher has an obligation to assist the student in making up the classwork missed. When the absence is unexcused, the teacher has no obligation to assist the student in making up the work for credit; however, the student is still responsible for making up the work so that continuing effective course participation is possible.³⁴

²⁶ Regulation JEA-RA, *Student Attendance*, § II.A.1.a, and § II.A.4.b.

²⁷ Ibid. § II.A.3.e.

²⁸ Ibid. § II.A.1.a.

²⁹ Ibid. § II.A.1.c.

³⁰ Regulation JFA-RA, *Student Rights and Responsibilities*, § III.D.2; 3.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Regulation JEA-RA, *Student Attendance*, §§ II.B.; II.C.; II.D.

³³ Ibid. This definition also aligns with the definition of chronic absenteeism described in Chapter IV that describes students who have missed 20 or more days in a school year (which would equal 10 days in a semester.)

³⁴ Regulation JFA-RA, *Student Rights and Responsibilities*, § III.D.6. See also Regulation JEA-RA, *Student Attendance*, § II.D.3.

Loss of Credit Policy. Under MCPS' *Student Attendance* regulation, high school students in grades 9-12 who miss five or more sessions of a class in a semester for "unlawful" reasons will lose credit for the class and receive a failing grade for the class.³⁵ The regulation specifies that three unexcused tardies to a class count as one absence.

Exclusion from Extracurricular Activities. MCPS Regulation IQB-RA, *Extracurricular Activities*, gives principals discretion to exclude a student from an extracurricular activity if the student had an unexcused absence on the same day as the activity.³⁶

School Attendance Plans. MCPS Policy IED, *Framework and Structure of High School Education*, sets out the Board of Education's policy for how schools should approach creating a high school environment "that meet[s] the educational and social-emotional needs of all adolescents...."³⁷

The policy addresses student attendance as follows:

To develop a climate that fosters student growth, schools should...

Develop an attendance plan that:

- (1) Complies with the requirements of State law and MCPS policies and regulations;
- (2) Provides for accurate and timely recording of school and class attendance;
- (3) Emphasizes the importance of regular school and class attendance and recognizes students who meet this requirement; and
- (4) Establishes procedures for enforcing regular school and class attendance and for working affirmatively with students and parents to resolve attendance issues.³⁸

³⁵ Regulation JEA-RA, *Student Attendance*, § II.D.2. See also Regulation JFA-RA, *Student Rights and Responsibilities*, § III.D.4: "At grade levels 9 through 12 where credits are applicable, excessive unexcused absences could result in the loss of credit and failure in the class."

³⁶ Regulation IQB-RA, *Extracurricular Activities*, § III.B.7.

³⁷ Policy IED, *Framework and Structure of High School Education*, § B.1.

³⁸ Ibid. § B.1.o.

Chapter III: Research on Truancy Risk Factors and Consequences

The research literature on absenteeism, truancy, and dropout prevention describes factors that contribute to truancy and the consequences and costs of truancy. This chapter summarizes the pertinent findings in this literature. Later in the report, Chapter VII describes best practices identified in research literature for reducing truancy and improving student attendance, and also describes the alignment between best practices and current practices within Montgomery County.

This chapter is presented in two parts:

- **Part A, Factors that Contribute to Truancy**, describes truancy risk factors among students, schools, and communities, and student and parent perspectives on the causes of truancy.
- **Part B, Consequences of Truancy**, summarizes the consequences and costs of truancy on students and the community at large.

Two observations emerge from OLO's review. First, a variety of factors related to students' personal lives, home lives, and school lives can lead to or exacerbate student truancy. Second, truancy can be both a cause and consequence of many troubling behaviors, including dropping out of high school, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and adult crime.

A. Factors that Contribute to Truancy

Oftentimes, school absence is an indicator of challenges occurring within families, schools, or communities.¹ Research literature describes several factors linked to truancy. The literature also includes survey data from parents and students identifying reasons for truancy. This part of the chapter is presented in two sections:

- **Section 1, Risk-Factors for Truancy**, describes personal, school, community, and other factors that contribute to truancy; and
- **Section 2, Student and Parent Perspectives on Truancy**, describes survey data from students and parents regarding the reasons why students skip school.

1. Risk-Factors for Truancy

The National Center for Student Engagement has identified three sets of factors that contribute to truancy. Table 3-1 on the next page summarizes these personal, school, and home and community factors.

¹ Open Society Institute - Baltimore, 2008

Table 3-1. Summary of Factors Contributing to Truancy

Type of Challenge	Factors
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor academic performance (sometimes due to special education needs) • A lack of vision of education as a means to achieve goals • Unmet mental health, alcohol, drug use, or abuse needs
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of effective attendance policies • Poor record keeping • “Push-out” policies (e.g., automatic failing grade for poor attendance) • Parents/guardians not notified of absences • Teachers who disrespect students • Unwelcoming atmospheres • Unsafe environments • Inadequate identification of special education needs
Home and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family concerns that pressure students into adult roles • Abuse or neglect • Teen pregnancy or parenting • Safety issues near home or school • Parental substance abuse • Parents who do not value education and are complicit in student absences

Source: National Center for Student Engagement

Together, these factors can undermine student engagement, which is the connectedness or attachment that students feel toward school. In particular, these factors can undermine students’:

- **Cognitive engagement** – the effort students put into mastering school subjects (e.g., I try my best in school);
- **Emotional engagement** – the feelings students have for their teachers, classmates, academics and school (e.g., I feel like I belong in school); and
- **Behavioral engagement** – reflects positive conduct, classroom application, and involvement in school-related activities (e.g., I follow the rules in school).

Research has also identified broader macro-level risk factors for truancy. For example, in 2005, 4th and 8th graders were more likely to report having missed three or more days of school in the prior four weeks if:

- Students spoke English as a second language;
- Students had a disability;
- Students were Native American; and/or
- Students were eligible for free and reduced priced meals.²

A study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation of elementary school children in five cities³ also found that students who evidenced the highest rates of absences were:

² *The Condition of Education*, U.S Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (May 2007).

³ Presentation by Hedy Chang at OSI-Baltimore (February 22, 2008).

- Poor children;
- Students who had experienced domestic or community violence; and/or
- Students of single-parent mothers who had limited education, were in poor health, depended on welfare and/or had three or more children.

A study of 8th and 10th grade students in the *Journal of School Health*⁴ also found that students of non-college educated parents and students who used drugs were more likely to skip school, while students involved in several types of activities had lower rates of truancy. Students with lower rates of truancy include students who:

- Participate in religious services;
- Have limited unsupervised time after school;
- Participate in college preparatory curriculum;
- Have strong academic achievement;
- Feel safe in school; or
- Do not use drugs.

2. Student and Parent Perspectives on Truancy

Survey data from students and parents describes additional factors for why students skip school. Surveys conducted by the National Center for Student Engagement identified the following reasons that students give for why they skip school:

- Classes are boring and not relevant;
- Teachers are disrespectful;
- No one seems to care;
- Negative peer influences;
- The environment is uncomfortable; and
- They don't know their different educational options.⁵

A Center for Social Organization of Schools survey of reasons 9th graders gave for not attending school in an urban, high poverty city indicated that:

- 50% reported discretionary reasons, such as oversleeping or wanting to hang out with friends;
- 25% reported feeling pushed out of school or bullied; and
- 25% cited factors indicating they were “pulled out” of school, such as family or work obligations.⁶

Surveys of parents from a U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Demonstration Project Evaluation⁷ indicated that their children did not attend school because they:

⁴ Henry, K.L., 2007 - Cited by OSI-Baltimore, 2008

⁵ *Why Students Skip School*, National Center for Student Engagement - Cited by Virginia Department of Education, 2006

⁶ Center for Social Organization of Schools, 2009 – Cited by OSI-Baltimore, 2008

⁷ OJJDP Demonstration Project Evaluation, 2004 – Cited by National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

- Felt unwelcome;
- Could get away with it;
- Would not pass anyway, so did not see the point in attending; and
- Were bullied and fearful.

These parents further indicated that their children would have remained in school if:

- The schools weren't so big;
- Students has an opportunity to make up work with some help; and
- Alternatives were available.

Similarly, students surveyed by the National Center for Student Engagement indicated that they would be more likely to stay in school if:

- More alternatives were available;
- More classes offered hands on instruction;
- They could get more attention and help from teachers; and
- Schedules were flexible.⁸

B. Consequences of Truancy

Truancy has been clearly shown to be related to dropping out of high school, substance use and abuse, and delinquency.⁹ The relationships are circular, rather than linear. In other words, truancy can be both a cause and consequence of any of these troubling behaviors. Outcomes and correlates of truancy include:

- **Dropping Out of High School** – Students who dropout often have attendance problems that begin in the elementary grades; students who skip significant numbers of classes often fail to earn credits. A recent study of Baltimore schools found that the majority of students who drop out of school missed between a year and a year and a half of schooling between 6th grade and the point at which they dropout.¹⁰
- **High School Expulsion** – A study of students expelled from Colorado schools found that nearly half of the youth were chronically truant in the year prior to expulsion, and 20 percent of the sample were expelled for truancy.¹¹
- **Substance Use** – Data from the Rochester Youth Study demonstrate a clear, linear relationship between truancy and the initiation of marijuana use.¹²

⁸ *Why Students Skip School*, National Center for Student Engagement - Cited by Virginia Department of Education, 2006

⁹ *Pieces of the Truancy Jigsaw Puzzle*, National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

¹⁰ Baltimore Educational Research Consortium, 2008

¹¹ Seeley, K. and Shockley, H., 1995 – Cited by National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

¹² Henry, K. and Huizinga D., 2005 - Cited by National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

- **Juvenile Delinquency** – Data from the National Incident Reporting System indicate that the number of crimes committed by school-age youth in Denver during school hours exceed those committed after school.¹³ Police saw a drop in the crime rate when police conducted truancy sweeps in Miami and St. Petersburg, FL and Dallas TX.¹⁴
- **Other Risky Behaviors** – Data from the Adolescent Health Survey show a relationship between school problems, including truancy, and weapon-related violence, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and early sexual intercourse. These effects are seen in the population in general and for almost every combination of ethnic group and risk factor.¹⁵
- **Adult Crime** – Though the relationship between truancy and adult criminal behavior is limited, chronic truancy clearly leads to high school dropout, and dropouts are greatly over-represented among prison and jail inmates.

Truancy has short-term costs, including costs to schools and courts and juvenile crime associated with truancy, and long-term costs including increased adult crime, lower tax revenues, and increased social service expenditures. In particular, data on Denver youth ages 12-15 demonstrates a very clear link between truancy and delinquency, where:

- 70% of suspended youth were chronically truant (9 or more days) in the previous 6 months;
- 97% of expelled youth were chronically truant in the previous year;
- 80% of dropouts were chronically truant in the past year;
- 90% of youth in detention for delinquent acts were truant (absent 4-9 days);
- Truants were 2 to 8 times as likely to be adjudicated delinquents;
- Truants were 12 times as likely to start marijuana use (chronic truants were 16 times as likely);
- Truants were 7 times as likely to engage in serious assault crimes (chronic truants were 12 times as likely); and
- Truants were more than 11 times as likely to engage in serious property crimes (chronic truants were 22 times as likely).¹⁶

The Baltimore Educational Research Consortium has found that schools with high absence rates can also evidence slower-paced instruction and lower achievement for all students:

If chronic absenteeism is widespread it will also impact students who are not absent. When significant numbers of students in a class are missing a great deal of instructional time, a teacher has a no-win choice. Either instruction can be slowed down for the whole class to provide time and opportunities to help absent students catch up when they return, or a teacher can maintain normal instructional pace and soon end up with large numbers of lost students. These lost students, in turn, may respond in frustration by withdrawing and giving up, or acting out and causing further missed instructional time.¹⁷

¹³ MacGillivray, H. and Mann-Erickson, G., 2006 – Cited by National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

¹⁴ Berger, W. N. and Wind, S., 2000; Galvin, T., 1997; and Fritsch, E. J. et al., 1999 – Cited by National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

¹⁵ Blum, R. et al., 2000 - Cited by National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

¹⁶ Henry, K, 2005 - Cited by OSI-Baltimore, 2008

¹⁷ Baltimore Educational Research Consortium, 2008

Chapter IV: Scope of Truancy Problem

This chapter describes challenges in tracking truancy and the scope of truancy within Montgomery County compared to other local jurisdictions. In the absence of demographic data on MCPS' habitually truant students, this chapter also describes data on six correlates of truancy that contribute to or result from truancy to better understand the characteristics of truant students.¹

This chapter is presented in three sections:

- **Part A, Measuring Truancy**, describes the difficulty in measuring truancy and compares Maryland's and other states' definitions of truancy.
- **Part B, Habitual Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism in Montgomery County**, describes MCPS data on habitually truant students by school and data on chronically absent students who missed more than 20 days of the past school year.
- **Part C, Truancy Correlates**, describes data on other measures of student performance and engagement that likely lead to or result from habitual truancy.

Several observations emerge from OLO's review:

- Less than three percent of Maryland students were habitually truant in 2009. However, official counts of habitual truant students may underestimate the actual number of habitual truant students in the State because they exclude students enrolled for fewer than 91 days in the same school.
- Less than one percent of MCPS students were habitually truant last year. In 2009, there were 984 habitual truant students, including 627 students in grades 9-12.
- Approximately seven percent of all MCPS students were chronically absent last year. In 2009, there were 8,637 chronically absent students; 47 percent were enrolled in high school.
- Between 2006 and 2009, habitual truancy in MCPS declined by five percent and rates of chronic absenteeism declined by 17 percent.
- MCPS does not collect or report data on habitual truancy by student race, ethnicity or service subgroup, or by student grade, age, or gender. It does report data on these subgroups for chronic absenteeism. School level data is currently the only metric used to track habitual truancy.
- Data on chronic absenteeism and five correlates of truancy - suspensions, loss of credit, academic ineligibility, grade retention, and dropouts - suggest that habitually truant students are disproportionately black, Latino, males, and enrolled in special education, ESOL², and free and reduced priced meal programs.
- Compared to MCPS' declining rates of habitual truancy and chronic absenteeism, MCPS has seen limited progress in decreasing the rates of truancy correlates. While MCPS has reduced rates of student suspension, rates of academic ineligibility have remained unchanged, and rates of lost credit, grade retention, and dropout have each increased.

¹ OLO relied on multiple data sources including MCPS and Maryland State Department of Education publications and unpublished MCPS data.

² ESOL stands for "English for Speakers of Other Languages."

A. Measuring Truancy

According to the National Center for School Engagement, the scope of the truancy problem is difficult to measure nationally due to three obstacles.³

- At the classroom level, the accuracy of school attendance records depends on the accuracy of attendance taking.
- At the district level, many record absences as excused unless proven otherwise.⁴
- At the state level, differences in compulsory attendance laws and definitions of habitual prevent national calculations of the number of truants based on common criteria.

Data compiled by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) in Table 4-1 below demonstrates the variation in state definitions of truancy. Compared to Maryland's definition of habitual truancy – requiring an unexcused absence rate of 20 percent or more (18 or more unexcused absences in one semester) – most other states reviewed by ECS consider students with far fewer unexcused absences as habitually truant.

Table 4-1. Examples of State Definitions of Habitual Truancy, 2005

State	Definition of Habitual Truancy	# of Unexcused Absences	% of Time Out of School*
Louisiana	A student fails to respond to all reasonable efforts to attend school after the fifth unexcused absence or tardy within a month or if a pattern of five absences a month is established.	5 days/month	23%
Maryland		18 days/semester	20%
Florida	A student with 15 unexcused absences within 90 calendar days that is subject to compulsory attendance laws.	15 days/90 days	17%
Connecticut	A public or private school student between the ages of 5 to 18 with 20 unexcused absences within a school year.	20 days/year	11%
Texas	A student required to attend school with 10 unlawful absences within a six-month period of the same school year, or 3 or more days within a four week period.	10 days/6 months or 3 days/4 weeks	11%
Illinois	A child, subject to the compulsory school attendance, who is unlawfully absent 10% or more of the previous 180 regular attendance days.	18 days/180 days	10%
New Mexico	A student who accumulated the equivalent of 10 or more unexcused absences within a school year.	10 days/year	6%
Maine	A student required to attend school or alternative instruction that is absent 10 or more full days during a school year or 7 consecutive school days.	10 days/year or 7 consecutive days	6%
Colorado	A public school student between the ages of 7 and 16 with four or more unexcused absences in any one month or 10 or more unexcused absences for the school year.	10 days/year or 4 days/month	6%

³ See *Pieces of the Truancy Jigsaw Puzzle*, National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

⁴ In MCPS, students are recorded as present unless proven otherwise.

Table 4-1. Examples of State Definitions of Habitual Truancy, 2005 (continued)

State	Definition of Habitual Truancy	# of Unexcused Absences	% of Time Out of School*
Wisconsin	A student is unlawfully absent for part or all of five or more days during a school semester.	5 days/semester	6%
California	Student has been reported as a truant 3 or more times in a school year (i.e., absent 3 or more days within a school year) and an appropriate district officer has made an effort to hold at least a conference with a parent or guardian and the student.	9 days/year	5%
Utah	A school-age minor who has received more than two truancy citations within one school year and 8 unlawful absences and, in defiance of the school authorities to resolve the attendance problem, refuses to regularly attend school or any scheduled period.	8 days/year	4%
Minnesota	A student under the age of 16 that is absent for 7 or more days (or one or more class periods for secondary students) or a student age 16-17 with 7 unexcused absences who has not lawfully withdrawn from school.	7 days/year	4%
Kentucky	Any child who has been reported as a truant two or more times (for being unlawfully absent or tardy three or more days) and any child who has been found by the juvenile court to have been reported as a truant two or more times during a one-year period.	6 days/year	3%
Arizona	Student truant for at least 5 school days within a school year.	5 days/year	3%
Wyoming	Any child with five or more unexcused absences in any one school year.	5 days/year	3%
Nevada	Any child who has been declared a truant three or more times (for having at least one unexcused absence) within one school year.	3 days/year	2%
Delaware	No definition for habitual truant; truants are defined as students who are unlawfully absent for more than 3 days.	n/a	—
Idaho	A student, in the judgment of the board of trustees, who has repeatedly violated attendance regulations, or any parent or guardian that has failed to have their child comply with the board's attendance regulations.	n/a	—
Pennsylvania	A student absent for three or more days or its equivalent following the first notice of truancy.	n/a	—

Note: * Based on a 90-day semester and a 180-day school year.

Source: ECS State Policy Database, Truancy and Habitual Truancy, Examples of State Definitions, April 2005

Based on Maryland's definition of truancy, nearly three percent of all public school students were habitual truants in 2009. This compares to less than one percent of all MCPS students. As noted in Table 4-2 on the next page, Montgomery County's truancy rate compares favorably to several suburban Washington and Baltimore jurisdictions including Baltimore, Anne Arundel, and Prince George's Counties, and trails slightly behind Frederick and Howard Counties.

Table 4-2. Percent of Habitual Truants in MCPS and Select Jurisdictions, 2006 - 2009

County School System	2006	2007	2008	2009
Montgomery	0.8%	0.9%	1.0%	0.7%
Howard	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Frederick	0.8%	0.8%	0.7%	0.6%
Prince George's	4.4%	4.2%	5.3%	9.6%
Baltimore	1.3%	1.4%	1.5%	1.9%
Anne Arundel	1.4%	1.3%	0.9%	0.8%
All MD School Systems	2.4%	2.2%	2.3%	2.8%

Sources: MSDE, Habitual Truants Maryland Public Schools (MDSE-DAA)

B. Habitual Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism

This section summarizes the data that MCPS collects on habitually truant⁵ students and compiles and submits annually to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). MCPS only collects data related to truancy by school, in accordance with MSDE guidelines, and does not collect additional data on habitually truant students by any subgroups measure, such as student race, ethnicity, gender, or service group status.

This section also describes MCPS' data on the number of students absent more than 20 days, which for purposes of this report are described as "chronically absent" students. Annually, MCPS provides data to MSDE on chronic absenteeism. The most recent year's available data is reported on the Maryland Report Card website by grade level and subgroup for each school and the school system overall. The Maryland Report Card also provides longitudinal data by school and grade level.

Data Limitations. MCPS data on truant students does not include several groups of students who do not consistently attend school. For example, according to MCPS, students who routinely skip a class or who are routinely tardy to class are not counted among habitually truant students.⁶ Attendance data for the purpose of counting habitually truant students is based on *days*, so among secondary students, only students who are absent for a majority of their courses on a given day are marked as absent (e.g., 4 out of 7 classes).⁷

Additionally, MSDE's count of habitually truant students in MCPS excludes students who do not attend the same school for at least 91 days of the school year. These students are not counted among a school's habitually truant students. As such, MCPS data on truancy excludes most students that demonstrate high mobility. A review of the data suggests that most students who transfer to a new school are excluded from the school system's compilation of attendance data. Of the approximately 20,000 students who either entered or withdrew from an MCPS campus in FY 2008, about 13,000 of these students were excluded from MCPS' calculations of habitual truancy and chronic absenteeism discussed in the next section (note membership counts used to track chronic absenteeism described on Table 4-5 compared to MCPS enrollment described on Table 5-4).

⁵ As described in Chapter II (page 4), "habitually truant" students are students who have *unlawfully* missed more than 20 percent of a marking period, semester, or school year, while enrolled in the same school for at least half the school year.

⁶ Meeting with MCPS staff from Department of Policy, Records, and Regulation, October 14, 2009

⁷ MCPS also tracks tardiness; at the high school level, three unexcused incidences of tardiness register as one unexcused absence. However, these converted absences are not used to calculate habitual tardiness data.

Habitual Truancy. Table 4-3 below describes the number of habitually truant MCPS students in 2009, overall and by school level/type. Table 4-4 describes trend data on MCPS' percentages of habitually truant students overall and among high schools for 2006-2009, based on MSDE and MCPS data.⁸ Together, Tables 4-3 and 4-4 demonstrate that:

- On average, less than one percent of MCPS students were truant habitually between 2006 and 2009.
- During this time frame, MCPS' rate of habitual truancy declined by five percent.
- High school students (in general education schools) comprised 65 percent of MCPS' truant students in 2009, while middle and elementary students made up 16-17 percent of truants.
- High schools in the red-zone (e.g., campuses located in higher poverty areas in the County, such as Wheaton, Northwood, and Gaithersburg) often evidenced higher rates of habitual truancy than campuses located in the green-zone.

Table 4-3. MCPS' Habitually Truant Students by School Type, 2009

	Number of Students	Distribution
All Schools	984	100%
High Schools	627	64%
Middle Schools	160	16%
Elementary Schools	166	17%
Special Schools	31	3%

Source: MSDE DPRR

Table 4-4: Percent of MCPS Students Habitually Truant Overall and by High School, 2006-2009

	2006	2007	2008	2009*	# Change	% Change
All MCPS Schools	0.75	0.91	0.99	0.71	-0.04	-5.3%
High Schools in Rank Order for 2009						
Wheaton	1.70	4.76	3.54	3.86	2.16	127.1%
Northwood	2.09	5.07	5.38	3.85	1.76	84.2%
Montgomery Blair	1.87	3.14	4.33	3.24	1.37	73.3%
Gaithersburg	2.13	3.14	3.71	3.09	0.96	45.1%
Clarksburg	n/a	0.88	3.02	2.42	**	
Einstein	3.84	3.54	2.07	1.84	-2.00	-52.1%
Richard Montgomery	0.47	0.53	1.37	1.79	1.32	280.9%
Magruder	1.29	1.41	1.88	1.78	0.49	38.0%
Seneca Valley	1.21	2.37	2.30	1.71	0.50	41.3%
Watkins Mill	1.04	0.69	1.26	1.70	0.66	63.5%

⁸ To calculate the percent of habitually truant students for 2009, OLO compared MCPS' count data on habitually truant students (i.e., 984 students) to 2009 enrollment data by school included in the MCPS FY10 CIP and 2009 Schools at a Glance.

Table 4-4. Percent of MCPS Students Habitually Truant Overall and by High School 2006-2009 (continued)

	2006	2007	2008	2009*	# Change	% Change
All MCPS Schools	0.75	0.91	0.99	0.71	-0.04	-5.3%
High Schools in Rank Order for 2009						
Springbrook	1.78	4.25	2.55	1.59	-0.19	-10.7%
Walt Whitman	0.32	0.37	0.27	1.52	1.20	375.0%
Paint Branch	0.40	0.46	1.15	1.44	1.04	260.0%
Quince Orchard	2.79	2.44	2.11	1.16	-1.63	-58.4%
Kennedy	0.48	0.82	1.22	1.16	0.68	141.7%
Northwest	2.45	1.61	3.73	0.99	-1.46	-59.6%
Bethesda-Chevy Chase	1.66	0.77	2.90	0.96	-0.70	-42.2%
Rockville	0.65	2.92	2.44	0.40	-0.25	-38.5%
Sherwood	0.18	0.32	0.32	0.38	0.20	111.1%
Blake	0.96	0.87	0.76	0.33	-0.63	-65.6%
Walter Johnson	0.00	0.62	0.62	0.25	0.25	**
Thomas Wootton	1.41	0.97	0.65	0.24	-1.17	-83.0%
Poolesville	0.47	0.43	0.11	0.10	-0.37	-78.7%
Churchill	1.21	0.97	1.11	0.09	-1.12	-92.6%
Damascus	0.25	0.50	0.19	0.07	-0.18	-72.0%

Sources: MSDE and MCPS DPRR

Chronic Absenteeism. Table 4-5 describes the number and rate of MCPS students absent 20 or more days, by grade level from 2006 to 2009. This data includes students with excused and unexcused absences, but excludes students enrolled for less than 91 days at their current campus. A review of the data during this time demonstrates the following:

- In 2009, 8,637 students in K-12 were chronically absent; nearly half of these students (47%) were enrolled in high school.
- The number of chronically absent MCPS students has diminished by 17 percent since 2006.
- From 2006 to 2009, rates of chronic absenteeism declined from 4.8 to 4.5 percentage points (6%) among elementary students, from 8.8 to 7.6 percentage points (14%) among middle school students, and from 11.7 to 9.0 percentage points (28%) among high school students.

Table 4-5. Number and Percent of MCPS Students Chronically Absent by Grade Level, 2006-2009

	2006	2007	2008	2009	# Change	% Change
Membership*	126,550	125,005	124,980	125,897	-653	-0.5%
Absent more than 20 days count						
Grades 1-5	2,400	1,927	2,303	2,255	-145	-6.1%
Grades 6-8	2,794	2,457	2,448	2,357	-437	-15.2%
Grades 9-12	5,250	4,953	5,048	4,025	-1,225	-29.5%
Absent more than 20 days rate						
Grades 1-5	4.8	3.9	4.7	4.5	-0.3	-6.5%
Grades 6-8	8.8	7.9	7.9	7.6	-1.2	-13.6%
Grades 9-12	11.7	11.1	11.3	9.0	-2.7	-27.8%

* Students enrolled 91 days or more at the same MCPS campus

Source: Maryland Report Card, Data Downloads

Table 4-6 below describes the percent of students chronically absent from MCPS' comprehensive high schools from 2005 to 2008. When compared to data on habitual truancy, data in Table 4-6 indicate the following:

- Several of the high schools with the highest levels of habitual truancy also demonstrate the highest levels of chronic absenteeism (e.g., Northwood, Wheaton, Einstein, and Gaithersburg).
- However, some of the high schools with the highest levels of chronic absenteeism do not evidence the highest rates of habitual truancy (e.g., Seneca Valley and Rockville) nor do some of the campuses with the highest levels of habitual truancy demonstrate the highest levels of chronic absenteeism (e.g., Montgomery Blair, Clarksburg, and Seneca Valley).
- Several of the campuses with the highest levels of chronic absenteeism have made strides in diminishing chronic absenteeism between 2005 and 2008 (e.g., Northwood and Einstein).

Table 4-6. Percent of MCPS Students Chronically Absent by High School, 2005-2008

	2005	2006	2007	2008	4-year average	4-year change
All High Schools	11.3	11.7	11.1	11.3	11.4	0.0
High Schools in Rank Order for 2005-2008 Average						
Northwood	26.0	16.3	20.9	19.2	20.6	-6.8
Einstein	17.4	20.1	17.0	11.3	16.5	-6.1
Wheaton	16.1	16.0	15.3	14.1	15.4	-2.0
Watkins Mill	13.2	13.4	14.5	16.0	14.3	2.8
Richard Montgomery	12.5	16.8	14.1	13.9	14.3	1.4
Gaithersburg	14.0	13.1	12.2	13.9	13.3	-0.1
Seneca Valley	13.4	13.7	12.5	12.3	13.0	-1.1
Rockville	12.1	13.6	11.5	12.7	12.5	0.6

Table 4-6. Percent of MCPS Students Chronically Absent by High School, 2005-2008 (continued)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	4-year average	4-year change
All High Schools	11.3	11.7	11.1	11.3	11.4	0.0
High Schools in Rank Order for 2005-2008 Average						
Northwest	12.1	12.3	11.5	13.3	12.3	1.2
Damascus	11.6	12.2	11.6	13.0	12.1	1.4
Quince Orchard	13.9	11.7	11.7	10.5	12.0	-3.4
Springbrook	10.7	13.0	12.4	11.3	11.9	0.6
Montgomery Blair	11.5	8.3	11.7	13.2	11.2	1.7
Magruder	9.8	12.1	10.4	10.1	10.6	0.3
Clarksburg	**	**	8.6	12.4	10.5	**
Bethesda-Chevy Chase	6.2	12.8	10.2	12.3	10.4	6.1
Blake	8.4	9.9	9.2	8.3	9.0	-0.1
Walter Johnson	8.6	8.5	8.5	8.9	8.6	0.3
Sherwood	8.5	9.7	7.9	7.1	8.3	-1.4
Poolesville	5.9	8.9	7.0	8.7	7.6	2.8
Paint Branch	7.7	8.2	6.0	7.4	7.3	-0.3
Kennedy	6.3	6.5	6.9	8.7	7.1	2.4
Winston Churchill	6.5	6.6	5.2	6.5	6.2	0.0
Walt Whitman	5.7	4.2	5.5	7.6	5.8	1.9
Thomas Wootton	6.5	3.7	3.5	3.2	4.2	-3.3

Source: MSDE, Habitual Truants Maryland Public Schools (MDSE-DAA), 2005-2008

Table 4-7 on the next page describes 2009 data on chronic absenteeism by grade level and subgroup. Rates of chronic absenteeism are disproportionately higher among black and Latino students and students receiving special services, particularly at the secondary level. Of note, Table 4-7 shows the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in 2009 occurred among the following groups of secondary students:

- Students receiving special education services (15%);
- Students receiving free and reduced priced meals (13-15%);
- Latino students (11-14%);
- Black students (9-10%); and
- Students enrolled in ESOL classes (7-11%).

In sum, while approximately 7 percent of all MCPS students demonstrated chronic levels of absenteeism (absent 20 or more days) over the past school year, less than one percent of all MCPS students evidenced habitual truancy (unlawfully absent 20 percent of the time). As MCPS' habitual truancy rate has diminished over the past four years, so has the rate of chronically absent students.

Table 4-7: Percent of MCPS Students Chronically Absent by Grade Level and Subgroup, 2009

Rates	All Grades	Grades 1-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12
All Students	6.9	4.5	7.6	9.0
By Racial and Ethnic Subgroup				
Asian	3.1	2.5	2.4	4.3
Black	8.1	5.5	9.1	10.3
Latino	10.4	6.7	11.2	14.2
White	5.7	3.5	6.6	7.3
By Service Subgroup				
Special Education	12.7	8.7	14.8	15.4
ESOL	6.9	5.5	6.9	11.2
FARMS	11.2	7.7	13.2	14.9

Source: Maryland Report Card

C. Truancy Correlates

A core objective of this project is to describe the factors associated with habitual truancy among MCPS students. For example, are there some identifiable predictors, such as prior academic performance, that are linked to habitual truancy? Are some specific subgroups more likely to demonstrate habitual truancy? MCPS, however, does not collect or report data on habitual truancy in ways that enable OLO to firmly identify the specific factors associated with habitual truancy within the County.

In the absence of this data, OLO utilized an alternate approach described below to understand what characteristics associate with habitual truancy in the County. This section is presented in three parts:

- Part 1, Methodology, describes OLO's identification of truancy correlates;
- Part 2, Correlates by Race and Ethnicity, describes the percent of MCPS students overall and by race and ethnicity that are represented among correlates of truancy; and
- Part 3, Trend Data on Truancy Correlates, describes overall and subgroup, the percent of MCPS students who have evidenced the correlates for truancy over the last four years.

1. Methodology

OLO reviewed existing data sources to identify measures with available data by subgroup that either contribute to or result from habitual truancy. Five truancy correlate measures were identified:

- Suspensions – MCPS collects annual data on the on the number and percent of students who received out-of-school suspensions for at least one-half of the day by subgroup, grade level, and specific school. This data is reported annually to the Board of Education.
- Freshmen loss of credit – MCPS collects data on the number of 9th graders who lose credit and fail one or more courses each semester, by student race and ethnicity. MCPS provided OLO unpublished data on this metric for 2004-2008 for OLO Report 2009-4.

- High school ineligibility for extracurricular activities – MCPS collects data on the number of high school students who are academically ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities each quarter, by student race and ethnicity. Typically, students with less than a 2.0 grade point average or who have failed one or more courses are academically ineligible. MCPS also provided OLO unpublished data on this metric for 2004-2008 for OLO Report 2009-4.
- Grade retention – MCPS collects and reports data annually to MSDE on the number of high school students who do not earn enough credits to advance to the next grade level. MCPS published 2002-2009 data by subgroup on grade retention among high school students for its October 26, 2009 Board of Education meeting.
- Dropout rates – MCPS collects and reports data annually to MSDE on the number of Grade 7-12 students and the number of Grade 9-12 students who drop out of school. MSDE publishes the Grade 9-12 data on the Maryland Report Card website. MCPS also recently published dropout trend data by subgroup for its October 26th Board of Education meeting.

Next, OLO reviewed the research literature to understand how these factors relate to truancy. The National Center for Student Engagement identifies attendance, attachment, and achievement as factors that contribute to truancy. Researchers have also identified absenteeism, behavior problems, and course failure as factors that reflect student disengagement and lead to increased student dropouts. As such, OLO posits several links between truancy and these five truancy correlates:

- Students who have been suspended often exhibit problem behavior and detachment from school;
- Students' loss of course credit for unexcused absences can contribute to truancy;
- Ineligibility for extra-curricular activities can further diminish students' attachments to school, which can lead to truancy;
- Grade retention can also diminish student attachment and motivation to attend school; and
- All of these factors can contribute to students' decisions to drop out of school.

2. Correlates by Race and Ethnicity.

Table 4-8 on the next page summarizes the percent of MCPS students by race and ethnicity who:

- Received an out-of-school suspension last year;
- Lost course credit in the first semester of 9th grade;
- Were academically ineligible in high school at the end of the school year;
- Did not earn enough credits to advance to the next grade; and
- Dropped out in high school.

A review of the data demonstrates that as with chronic absenteeism, black and Latino students were overrepresented among each of these measures, suggesting that these student subgroups also have the highest rates of habitual truancy in MCPS.

Table 4-8. Percent of MCPS Students among Truancy Correlates, by Subgroup

	Out-of- School Suspensions 2008	Grade 9 Loss of Credit 2008*	Academic Ineligibility 2008**	Grade 9-12 Retention 2009	Grade 9-12 Dropouts 2009
All Students	4.0	23.2	21.1	5.3	2.7
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups					
Asian	1.3	9.0	10.7	2.3	1.0
Black	8.6	38.5	34.7	8.0	3.9
Latino	5.1	40.7	36.2	9.5	5.2
White	2.0	8.9	10.6	2.6	1.3

Notes: * End of 1st semester; ** End of school year

Sources: Maryland Report Card, OLO analysis of MCPS unpublished data referenced in OLO Report 2009-4, October 26, 2009 Board of Education Packet; MSDE-DAA, Summary of Attendance, 2006-2008; MCPS 2007-2008 Annual Suspension Report

Specifically, Table 4-8 shows that:

- In 2008, 5-9 percent of Latino and black students received out-of-school suspensions compared to 1-2 percent of Asian and white students;
- In 2008, 39-41 percent of black and Latino 9th graders lost credit for one or more classes their first semester compared to 9 percent of Asian and white students;
- In 2008, 35-36 percent of black and Latino high school students were academically ineligible to participate in extra-curricular activities at the end of the year compared to 11 percent of Asian and white students;
- In 2009, 8-10 percent of black and Latino high school students were not promoted to the next grade level compared to 2-3 percent of their Asian and white peers; and
- In 2009, 4-5 percent of black and Latino students dropped out of high school compared to 1 percent of Asian and white students.

3. Trend Data on Truancy Correlates

This part describes trends data on five correlates of truancy to offer context on whether the school system's overall performance on these measures has improved over time. An analysis of the data suggests limited MCPS progress on these measures. The percent of students suspended diminished over time, but student academic ineligibility remained unchanged and rates of lost credit, grade retention, and dropouts among high school students increased.

1. Suspensions

Table 4-9 on the next page describes the percent of MCPS students overall and by subgroup with out-of-school suspensions of at least a half day from 2005 to 2008. A review of the data shows that rates of out-of-school suspension diminished by 13 percent for MCPS students overall.

Table 4-9: Percent of MCPS Students with Out-of-School Suspensions by Subgroup, 2005-2008

	2005	2006	2007	2008	# Change	% Change
All Students	4.6	4.7	4.6	4.0	-0.6	-13.0%
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups						
Asian	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.3	-0.3	-18.8%
Black	9.9	10.6	9.8	8.6	-1.3	-13.1%
Latino	5.7	5.8	5.8	5.1	-0.6	-10.5%
White	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.0	-0.2	-9.1%
Service Subgroups						
Special Education	10.9	10.7	10.2	9.3	-1.6	-14.7%
ESOL	3.6	3.5	3.4	2.7	-0.9	-25.0%
FARMS	8.1	9.0	8.5	7.4	-0.7	-8.6%

Source: MCPS Annual Suspension Reports, 2007 and 2008

Further, MCPS' Office of School Performance data on out-of-school suspensions shows a continued downward trend in suspensions for the 2008-2009 school year, with 3,214 fewer suspensions compared to 2007-2008.⁹

2. Loss of Credit

Table 4-10 describes the percent of first semester freshmen who failed one or more courses in their first semester of high school between 2004 and 2008. A review of the data shows that freshmen first semester loss of credit rates increased 25 percent for MCPS students overall.

Table 4-10: Percent of MCPS Freshmen Losing Credit First Semester by Subgroup, 2005-2008

	2005	2006	2007	2008	# Change	% Change
All Students	18.6	21.3	23.1	23.2	4.6	24.7%
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups						
Asian	6.7	8.4	9.3	9.0	2.3	34.3%
Black	32.0	37.2	39.9	38.5	6.5	34.3%
Latino	33.1	37.3	40.5	40.7	7.6	23.0%
White	8.5	9.0	9.1	8.9	0.4	4.7%

Source: OLO analysis of unpublished MCPS data, Appendix Table 9 of OLO Report 2009-4

3. Academic Ineligibility

Table 4-11 on the next page describes the percent of MCPS high school students overall and by subgroups that were academically ineligible to participate in extra-curricular activities at the end of the school year from 2005 to 2008. A review of the data demonstrates that end of the year academically ineligibility among high school students remained virtually unchanged between 2005 and 2008, at 21 percent of all students.

⁹ Weast, J., Memorandum to Board of Education, September 8, 2009

Table 4-11. Percent of MCPS Students Academically Ineligible at the End of the Year by Subgroup, 2005-2008

	2005	2006	2007	2008	# Change	% Change
All Students	21.2	22.3	22.6	21.1	-0.1	-0.5%
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups						
Asian	10.1	11.5	11.7	10.7	0.6	5.9%
Black	34.3	36.8	36.1	34.7	0.4	1.2%
Latino	37.6	39.1	40.5	36.2	-1.4	-3.7%
White	12.3	11.9	11.6	10.6	-1.7	-13.8%

Source: OLO analysis of unpublished MCPS data cited in Appendix Table 11 of OLO Report 2009-4

4. Grade Retention

Table 4-12 below describes the percent of MCPS high school students who earned too few credits to advance to the next grade between 2006 and 2009. A review of the data demonstrates that grade retentions among all high school students have increased 15 percent from 2006 to 2009.

Table 4-12: Percent of MCPS High School Students Held Back a Grade by Subgroup, 2006-2009

	2006	2007	2008	2009	# Change	% Change
All Students	4.6	5.0	5.6	5.3	0.7	15.2%
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups						
Asian	2.2	2.2	2.8	2.3	0.1	4.5%
Black	7.0	7.8	8.3	8.0	1.0	14.3%
Latino	8.7	9.1	10.8	9.5	0.8	9.2%
White	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.6	0.2	8.3%

Source: Memorandum to Board of Education, October 26, 2009

5. Dropouts

Table 4-13 on the next page describes the percent of MCPS high school students by subgroup who dropped out of school between 2006 and 2009. A review of the data shows that:

- Dropout rates among high school students increased by 35 percent from 2006 to 2009.
- Dropout rates increased the most among students receiving special services, increasing by 80 percent for students with disabilities and English language learners, and by 55 percent for students receiving free and reduced priced meals.
- In 2009, English language learners and Latino high school students had the highest dropout rates (over 5%), followed by low-income students (4.5%), black students and students with disabilities (4%), and male students (3.3%).

Table 4-13. Percent of MCPS High School Students Who Dropped Out by Subgroup, 2006-2009

	2006	2007	2008	2009	# Change	% Change
All Students	2.0	2.7	2.9	2.7	0.7	35.0%
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups						
Asian	0.7	1.0	1.1	1.0	0.3	42.9%
Black	2.7	3.6	3.9	3.9	1.2	44.4%
Latino	4.3	5.4	5.8	5.2	0.9	20.9%
White	1.0	1.5	1.4	1.3	0.3	30.0%
Service Subgroups						
Special Education	2.1	2.7	3.2	3.8	1.7	81.0%
ESOL	3.3	4.9	4.0	5.9	2.6	78.8%
FARMS	2.9	3.0	4.0	4.5	1.6	55.2%
Gender Subgroups						
Male	2.3	3.2	3.4	3.3	1.0	43.5%
Female	1.7	2.2	2.3	2.1	0.4	23.5%

Source: Table 2 and Appendix E of October 26, 2009 Board of Education Packet on Graduation Rates (Tables E1, E6, and E10)

Chapter V: Montgomery County's Practices for Reducing Truancy

Montgomery County's local and state-funded agencies implement a number of practices to address truancy. This chapter describes the following agencies' truancy-related practices:

- Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS);
- Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD);
- The State's Attorney's Office (SAO);
- Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS);
- Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services; and
- The Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (HOC).

These agencies provide both direct and indirect services to reduce truancy. Direct services explicitly focus on improving the attendance of chronically absent or habitually truant students. Indirect services often focus on improving outcomes among students at risk for habitual truancy and can include increasing school attendance, but these services are not targeted to chronically absent or habitually truant students.

MCPS has primary responsibility for identifying and delivering services to reduce truancy in the County. MCPS offers direct services to increase attendance among chronically absent and habitually truant students. **Part A, Montgomery County Public Schools**, describes the school system's approach to preventing, intervening, and turning around truancy.

MCPS also partners with other local agencies to address the root causes of truancy such as mental health concerns. **Part B, Interagency Efforts**, describes the direct cross-agency efforts of the Interagency Truancy Review Board and the University of Baltimore School of Law Truancy Court program, and the indirect cross-agency efforts of the Kennedy Cluster Project and Positive Youth Development Initiative, which seek to improve performance outcomes among at-risk youth.

Criminal justice agencies in the County focus directly on truancy by delivering sanctions to deter truancy and indirectly by fostering safe school environments and requiring adjudicated youth to attend school. **Part C, Criminal Justice Agencies**, describes the Police Department's efforts to support school safety and reduce juvenile crime, the State's Attorney's Office efforts to prosecute parents for truancy, and the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services' efforts to support school attendance within the County.

The County's Department of Health and Human Services and the Housing Opportunities Commission also work directly with truant youth and indirectly with at-risk children to address the core causes of truancy. **Part D, Health and Human Services and the Housing Opportunities Commission**, describes DHHS' multi-faceted efforts to address the root causes of truancy, and HOC's efforts to encourage school attendance among the children and families it serves.

A. Montgomery County Public Schools

This part describes MCPS staff perceptions of factors that contribute to truancy, MCPS' strategies and activities to improve attendance of habitually truant and chronically absent students, and MCPS staff recommendations to improve the effectiveness of these strategies and activities. The observations that follow are based on OLO interviews with MCPS central-office and school-based staff and a review of state and local reports on truancy and related information.

This part is presented in three sections:

- **Section 1, MCPS Perspectives on Truancy**, describes risk factors and reasons for truancy and dropping out of school identified in MCPS and MSDE publications and via interviews.
- **Section 2, MCPS Programs to Curb Truancy**, describes MCPS programs and approaches to curb truancy and identifies the MCPS offices that administer these efforts.
- **Section 3, MCPS Perspectives on Program Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement**, describes staff perspectives on effective strategies and continuing challenges for reducing truancy and recommendations for interagency action to improve the County's effectiveness.

Five observations emerge from OLO's review:

- MCPS staff identified several root causes for truancy that include prior academic performance, family issues, and a disinterest in the traditional school setting.
- Pupil Personnel Workers (PPWs) often serve as the primary staff for mitigating truancy.
- PPW's staffing allocations and per student ratios have remained constant despite increases in MCPS' percentages of low-income students, English language learners, and dropouts.
- PPW's work closely with school-based staff members to implement two problem solving approaches aimed at curbing truancy that to date have not been evaluated.
- MCPS staff interviewed indicate that efforts to improve students' interest in school by increasing access to alternative and career and technology programs hold the most promise for reducing truancy.

1. MCPS Perspectives on Truancy

MCPS' Pupil Personnel Worker (PPW) Handbook notes that attendance problems may be symptomatic of other issues. To best understand how MCPS approaches truancy, OLO began interviews with school-based staff with the following question: "From your perspective(s), what factors appear to contribute to truancy?"

We received a range of responses. Of note, one personnel pupil worker highlighted a difference between younger and older truant students: In elementary school, truancy occurs across all socio-economic levels, while in middle and high school, truancy often aligns with the achievement gap evident by race, ethnicity, language, and income.

The factors that contribute to truancy, as identified by MCPS staff, mirror many of the factors that contribute to students dropping out of school. These factors also correlate with categories used by the Maryland State Department of Education to identify the reason why a student drops out of school. See Table 5-2 on page 31 for the MSDE dropout categories.

The table below summarizes risk factors for truancy and dropping out identified by MCPS school-based staff, MCPS Office of Shared Accountability (OSA) staff, and an Identity study cited by MCPS' Director of Student Services, Stephen Zagami.¹

Table 5-1. Risk Factors for Truancy and for Dropping Out of School Identified by MCPS Staff

Identified by...	Risk Factor
Risk Factors for Truancy	
MCPS School-Based Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic failure/getting behind in credits • Disinterest in traditional school setting and/or few alternative programs • Poor parenting (lack of parental control/lack of support for child's education) • Mental health issues (child and/or parent) • Students' work demands • Gang involvement • Child care (for students' children or siblings) • MCPS' loss-of-credit policy • Stress of school/students feeling overwhelmed • Bullying/fear of attending school
Risk Factors for Dropping Out of School	
Office of Shared Accountability Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A history of "grade retention" – being held back one or more grades; • Being older than their grade level cohort (e.g., 9th graders age 16 or above); • Being low-income (measured by receipt of free and reduced priced meals); • English language learner; • Male gender; and • A history of absenteeism
Risk Factors for Dropping Out among Latino Students	
Identity, cited by MCPS Director of Student Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigration status • Low income • Safety/school travel fears/phobias • Family status (parents not present or recently reunited) • Interrupted schooling • Language barriers

Source: OLO interviews; October 26, 2009 presentation to the Board of Education

¹ The Office of Shared Accountability and the Director of Student Services identified these factors in presentations to the Board of Education on October 26, 2009.

Table 5-2 summarizes the reasons for dropouts among MCPS students in Grades 7-12 from 2006 to 2008. “Lack of interest” in schooling accounted for 58 percent of all MCPS dropouts in 2008, followed by “whereabouts unknown,” which accounted for another 24 percent of dropouts.

Table 5-2. Number of MCPS Dropouts in Grades 7-12 by Reason, 2006-2008

	2006	2007	2008	Change
Total Dropouts	1,102	1,513	1,532	430
Dropouts by Reason				
Lack of Interest	586	782	881	295
Whereabouts Unknown	347	521	362	15
Academic	39	97	132	93
Employment	48	51	75	27
Expulsion > 16	27	18	16	-11
Expulsion < 16	21	11	11	-10
Parenting	5	6	9	4
Discipline	1	6	8	7
Pregnancy	4	2	8	4

Source: MSDE-DAA, Summary of Attendance, 2006-2008

2. MCPS Programs to Curb Truancy

This section describes MCPS’ programs designed to curb student truancy:

- **Part a, Three-Tier Framework for MCPS Truancy Programs**, describes how MCPS delivers truancy prevention and intervention strategies based on the level of students’ needs;
- **Part b, Organizational Structure**, describes the organization of MCPS’ central-offices that deliver school- and field-based services to curb truancy, and describes how student record keepers track attendance and truancy data; and
- **Part c, Problem Solving Approaches**, describes the team-based approaches that MCPS utilizes to target services to students across the three programming tiers.

a. Three-Tier Framework for MCPS Truancy Programs

To prevent and reduce habitual truancy, MCPS uses a three-tiered framework that incorporates a variety of strategies. This section describes each tier and the strategies used within each tier. Table 5-3 on the next page summarizes the three tiers.

Table 5-3. MCPS Three-Tier Framework for Curbing Truancy

Tier	Objectives	Interventions	Targets Students with Unlawful Absences Rates of...
1	Prevent truancy	Universal strategies and primary interventions for all students (e.g., school handbook; detention for truancy/tardiness; school staff/parent conferences; school attendance plans)	10% or less
2	Increase attendance among chronically absent students	Add targeted strategies and focused interventions for small groups and at-risk students (e.g., attendance contracts, mentors or buddies, wake-up calls, flexible schedules, home visits)	10 to 19%
3	Increase attendance among habitual truants	Add intensive targeted interventions for individual students with increased frequency and duration (e.g., pick up student, service referrals, school check-in/check-out, Truancy Review Board)	20% or higher

Sources: MCPS PPW Attendance Improvement Brochure and Problem Solving Guidelines

Tier 1- Truancy Prevention and Primary Intervention Strategies. Tier 1 interventions are offered to all students to maximize school attendance and prevent truancy. Strategies employed at this level include:²

- Communicating attendance policies to parents, guardians, and MCPS school-based staff through methods such as student handbooks and Parents Academies;
- Tracking student attendance and contacting parents when unexpected absences occur;
- Using positive behavior supports and other school-based initiatives (e.g., 9th grade academies) to promote student engagement in school;
- Meetings among school-based staff when students transition into new schools (e.g., middle to high school) to identify students who are or are at-risk of becoming truant to develop and implement strategies for improving students' success (e.g., summer transition meetings with parents and students);
- Use of detention and enforcement of loss of credit and ineligibility policies to deter unlawful absences and promote student compliance with attendance policies;
- Student conferences with teachers to share issues and develop a positive approach to improve student attendance; and
- Providing information and assistance to schools through MCPS central offices to support tracking of student attendance (e.g., Department of Student Services and Department of Policy, Records, and Reporting).

Based on MCPS' truancy prevention/intervention model, Tier 1 strategies should be effective at ensuring that the unlawful absenteeism rate for most students (80-90 percent of students) is 10 percent or below. For students unresponsive to Tier 1 strategies, MCPS adds an additional layer of interventions in Tier 2 designed to address chronic absenteeism.

² Other Tier I strategies offered by MCPS include school attendance plans, principal attendance letters, teacher/parent conferences, and consultations by school nurses with medical doctors if there are illness related absences.

Tier 2 – Targeted Intervention Strategies for At-Risk/Chronically Absent Students. Tier 2 interventions provide an added layer of targeted practices to improve attendance among students at risk of becoming habitually truant. At-risk students often have high levels of excused and unexcused absences, with unlawful absence rates between 10 and 19 percent. Tier 2 strategies often include:

- Written notification to parents of absences and academic impact;
- Phone contact with parent by school-based staff;
- In-person meetings/conferences between the parent, student (as appropriate), and members of the school’s Collaborative Problem Solving team (described in the next section);
- Nurse consultation, if absences are illness related;
- Home visits with targeted goals (e.g., providing wake-up calls for students);
- Referrals to mentoring program;
- Offering flexible/abbreviated school schedules;
- Offering schedule/teacher changes, including placement in Alternative Level 1 program;
- Use of attendance contracts;
- Providing recognition for improved attendance, and buddy and incentive programs;
- Referrals to school counselors for in-school individual or group counseling;
- Referrals to community agencies for student/family support;
- Ensuring the student has caught up on missed school work before returning to school; and
- Communicating with teachers to solicit support for the student's return to class.

Tier 2 strategies seek to improve the attendance of a majority of the students who are unresponsive to Tier 1 interventions. At a minimum, Tier 2 strategies try to sustain the attendance of chronically absent students and prevent these students from becoming habitual truants.

Tier 3 – Intensive Strategies for Habitual Truants. Tier 3 interventions are designed to get habitually truant students to return to school on a regular basis or to enter other educational environments if they have dropped out of school. Because of the close connection between habitual truancy and dropping out of school, these Tier 3 strategies are also central components of MCPS’ dropout prevention and recovery approach. These intensive strategies include:

- Sending letters to parents of students with 20 percent or more unexcused absences;
- Holding parent conferences with school Educational Management Teams;
- Assigning a mentor at the school;
- Using “check-in/check-out” protocols to monitor attendance daily;
- Encouraging students who have lost credits due to truancy to enroll in High School Plus or Online Pathway to Graduation;
- Enabling students to enroll for an additional year of school;
- Making referrals to community services;
- Making referrals to the Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB);
- Making referrals to MCPS Level 2 Alternative Programs; and
- Monitoring students’ ITRB and parents’ court cases, and providing follow-up.

School principals and Pupil Personnel Workers (PPWs) make referrals to the Interagency Truancy Review Board. MCPS' Department of Student Services (DSS) reports that there is no established timeline for trying Tier 2 interventions before initiating an ITRB referral. DSS estimates that schools try school-based interventions for two to three months before making ITRB referrals.

Based on MCPS' truancy prevention/intervention model, Tier 3 strategies should prove effective at increasing the attendance of a majority of habitually truant students. For those students who do respond favorably to the Tier 3 strategies and have reached the age of 16, PPWs and school-based staff inform students of the following options for continuing their education:

- General Education Development Test (GED);
- Montgomery County Conservation Corps (for individuals age 17 to 24);
- Maryland Job Corps (individuals age 16 to 25);
- Free State Challenge Program sponsored by MSDE and the Maryland National Guard in Aberdeen, MD (for students age 16 to 18);
- Gateway to College Program at Montgomery College (for students age 16 to 20); and
- Online Pathway to Graduation Program (for students 3 credits shy of graduation).

b. MCPS' Organizational Structure

Two primary offices oversee the school system's truancy prevention and abatement strategies and programs:

- The Office of School Performance; and
- The Office of Special Education and Student Services' Department of Student Services.

Two other offices prepare reports and data related to truant students:

- The Office of Shared Accountability's Department of Policy, Records, and Reporting (DPRR) – submits data for the Maryland State Department of Education's annual report on habitual truancy; and
- The Office of the Chief Technology Officer – prepares reports for schools describing individual students' attendance and absenteeism patterns.

Office of School Performance. The Office of School Performance (OSP) monitors student progress, selects and evaluates principals, coordinates and assigns resources, and allocates staff and other resources to MCPS schools. OSP's community superintendents and performance directors oversee individual schools. These staff visit each school campus at least twice a month to oversee school operations, to review principals' performance, and to ensure that programs are effectively responding to the needs of the student population.

When absenteeism, truancy, and/or dropouts are a specific concern, community superintendents work with principals to ensure that a school addresses these challenges. For example, a community superintendent may recommend that a school develop an attendance improvement plan if it has a high rate of habitual truancy.

Student Record Keepers. Classroom teachers and attendance secretaries are responsible for recording student attendance data. In elementary and middle schools, the first period/homeroom teacher takes attendance and the school's attendance secretary enters the data into MCPS' central data management system. Attendance taken in later periods in elementary and middle schools is logged into teachers' electronic grade books rather than the central data system. Alternatively, at the high school level, teachers enter attendance for each period directly into the central data system.

Each evening, attendance secretaries notify parents/guardians of student absences via Connect Ed – an automated calling system. Monthly, MCPS provides an attendance report to the Director of Pupil Personnel Services and to each school's principal, attendance secretary, and PPW that identifies students who have missed at least 20 percent of their classes.

This past summer, MCPS added two new components to the monthly attendance report. First, it began to identify students who miss between 10 and 19 percent of their classes; second, it began to distinguish between whether an absence was excused or unexcused. These new features give school-based staff additional information that, in the past, they had to compile on their own.

Attendance secretaries, usually in collaboration with school counselors and/or pupil personnel workers, use the reports to distinguish between students with high levels of *unexcused* absences from students with high levels of *excused* absences. The principal sends a letter to the parents/guardians of habitually truant students – those students whose unexcused absences total 20 percent or more. School counselors and a school's PPW also receive this letter.

Department of Student Services. The primary purpose of the Department of Student Services (DSS) is to address both academic and non-academic barriers to student success. DSS' functions include:

- School counseling;
- Psychological services;
- Transition support for adjudicated youth;
- Residency and international admissions; and
- Truancy and dropout prevention.

DSS supervises the professional staff that delivers truancy prevention programming in schools, including psychologists and pupil personnel workers. Further, DSS provides information to schools to help support their attendance policies. For example, DSS provides templates that schools can use to develop attendance plans and contracts with students, and guidelines on how to refer students to the Interagency Truancy Review Board. DSS also emphasizes the importance of attendance directly to parents/guardians and through the Parent's Academy³ and meetings with parents.

Pupil Personnel Workers: PPWs are the primary MCPS staff assigned to work on attendance and truancy issues. PPWs can receive referrals of students from counselors, principals, teachers, school nurses, parents, and students. Currently, 46 PPWs are assigned to MCPS' 200 campuses, with each PPW responsible for three to five schools. Additionally, one PPW oversees the six alternative programs described at the end of this section.

³ According to MCPS website, the Parent's Academy is designed to inform and empower parents as advocates and partners in their children's education. Workshop topics include advocating for your child, guiding your child's decision-making, and behind the scenes tours of transportation, food services, and Montgomery College.

In addition to truancy and dropout prevention, PPW's other responsibilities include helping school-based staff address academic barriers, making alternative program referrals, and supporting school transfers. PPW's attendance and truancy abatement duties represent less than half of their professional responsibilities and work scope. With respect to attendance, PPWs:

- Help school staff develop interventions to address chronic attendance issues;
- Foster understanding and collaboration among home, school, and community regarding the importance of good attendance;
- Help school staff identify students at risk of dropping out and refer students to a problem-solving team when appropriate;
- Work with school staff in referring, placing, monitoring, and facilitating transitions for students in alternative programs with attendance goals;
- Work with school staff to refer students who have resisted prior intervention to the Interagency Truancy Review Board; and
- Manage the cases of students and families involved with the ITRB process.

According to the Board of Education's review of the FY 2008 MCPS budget, there is no enrollment-based formula used to budget pupil personnel workers or school psychologist positions.⁴ The number of PPWs has increased by three positions – from 44 to 47 full time equivalents (FTEs) – over the past five years in order to increase central-office support of the Collaborative Action Process (described on page 38).

While overall MCPS enrollment has remained constant, Table 5-4 below shows that the number of low-income and English language learners enrolled in MCPS, as well as the number of student dropouts, has increased significantly between 2003 and 2008. MCPS notes that the PPW to student ratio during this time frame has declined from 1:3,086 in 2003 to 1:2,915 in 2008.

Table 5-4. MCPS Enrollment, Dropouts, and PPW Staffing, 2003-2008

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	% Change
Students (#)							
All Students	139,879	139,098	139,310	139,311	137,746	137,667	-1.6%
Dropouts (Gr. 9-12)	918	827	845	987	1,314	1,404	52.9%
Distribution of Enrollment (%)							
ESOL	8.5	8.1	8.9	9.6	10.4	11.7	37.7%
FARMS	22.5	22.9	23.7	25.8	24.7	25.8	14.7%
Staffing (#)							
Pupil Personnel Workers (PPWs)	45	44	44	47	47	47	4.4%

Sources: MCPS Schools at a Glance, County Schools Summaries, 2003-2008; October 26, 2009 Board of Education Packet; MCPS responses to FY 2008 Board of Education Budget Questions (#45)

⁴ See MCPS response to FY 2008 Board of Education Budget Question #45.

Alternative Programs. DSS manages the Level 2 and 3 Alternative Programs in MCPS that address issues of attendance, behavior, substance abuse, and chronic school failure for students unsuccessful in traditional school settings. Home schools and the Office of School Performance manage the Level 1 alternative programs delivered in students' home schools.

Level 2 programs typically are out-of-school programs that serve disruptive students who have not been successful in Level 1 programs. Level 3 programs are generally reserved for students who have been recommended for expulsion. Students typically remain in alternative programs for one to three semesters.

Table 5-5 lists MCPS' Level 2 and 3 Alternative Programs, which serve approximately 400 students.

Table 5-5. MCPS Level 2 and 3 Alternative Programs

	Middle Schools	High Schools
Level 2 Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Glenmont Program at Lynnbrook Center – Downcounty Hadley Farms Program – Upcounty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needwood Academy Phoenix Program for students recovering from substance abuse
Level 3 Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fleet Street 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Randolph Academy

Source: MCPS Program Budget FY 2009

c. MCPS' Problem-Solving Approaches

This subsection describes MCPS' problem solving approach for improving attendance outcomes – the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) model. It also describes a precursor problem solving model to the CPS (the Collaborative Action Process) that has been evaluated by MCPS.

Problem-Solving to Improve Attendance. Many of the strategies in MCPS' three tier framework are based on a Collaborative Problem Solving/Educational Management Team process. In this process, school-based staff, administrators, and DSS staff determine which services – Tier 1, 2, or 3 – to target to students. The following core beliefs guide this approach:

1. **Universal:** Every student should have “the opportunity to learn” and to respond to best practices/strategies that are effective for the majority of students.
2. **Targeted:** Individual students who do not respond to best practices should have access to interventions that have been proven successful among students requiring additional supports for success.
3. **Individual:** Only students who have not responded to universal and targeted best practices should receive the most intensive interventions to ensure that the benefits of these services outweighs their costs and occasional delivery in separate settings (e.g., alternative programs).

Students who do not respond to Tier 1 interventions also receive Tier 2 interventions. Students who do not respond to combined Tier 1 and 2 interventions also receive Tier 3 interventions.

For students who do not responded sufficiently to Tier 1 instruction and interventions, a school uses the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) process to identify and address the root causes of truancy for specific students. A CPS team typically consists of grade-level staff, but can include teachers, school counselors, students, student services staff such as PPWs, nurses, and psychologists, and the grade-level administrator. If a student has a disability, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team can serve in the CPS function.

MCPS defines the essential steps in the problem solving process as follows:

- Step 1. Define the problem (PLAN)
- Step 2. Develop an intervention (PLAN)
- Step 3. Implement the intervention (DO)
- Step 4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention (STUDY)
- Step 5. Continue, modify, or end the intervention (ACT)

For students unresponsive to Tier 2 strategies, an Educational Management Team (EMT), often including the CPS team plus additional staff, is convened to further problem solve. The EMT uses the same problem solving approach described above, but can coordinate the delivery of more intensive Tier 3 services to high-need students, including habitual truants.

Table 5-6 summarizes MCPS' problem solving approach.

Table 5-6. MCPS' Three-Tiered Problem Solving Model

Tier	% of Students Targeted	Consultation	Interventions
1	100%	Teacher/Parent or Teacher/Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General education program: all students Preventative, proactive (e.g. school handbook; detention for truancy/tardiness)
2	5-10%	Collaborative Problem Solving Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add targeted interventions: Small groups/individuals Supplemental services (e.g. attendance contract, assign student a mentor/buddy)
3	1-5%	Educational Management Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add intensive targeted interventions: More individualized Increased frequency and duration (e.g. pick up student, Truancy Review Board)

Source: MCPS Collaborative Problem Solving Guidelines, p. I-3

The Department of Student Services is in the process of implementing a data gathering strategy to allow school staff and PPW's working with EMTs to track student interventions and document their responses. Staff involved in the problem solving process input data into the MyMCPS system. The data becomes available to relevant staff, including counselors, PPWs, and administrators.

Problem Solving to Reduce Disproportionate Representation in Special Education. Since 2002, several MCPS schools have used a similar problem solving model, the Collaborative Action Process (CAP), to reduce the over-representation of black, Latino, and low-income students in special education. The Collaborative Problem Solving model is based on CAP, but MCPS discontinued support for CAP in 2008 because of inconsistencies in implementation.

Table 5-7 compares overlapping problem solving components of the CAP and CPS models.

Table 5-7. Comparison between Problem Solving Components of MCPS' Collaborative Action Process (CAP) and Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) Models

Step	Collaborative Action Process (CAP)	Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS)
1	Problem identification	Define the problem (PLAN)
2	Problem analysis	Develop an intervention (PLAN)
3	Intervention planning and implementation	Implement the intervention (DO)
4	Monitoring and evaluation	Evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention (STUDY)
5	n/a	Continue, modify, or end the intervention (ACT)

Sources: MCPS Problem Solving Guidelines and Office of Shared Accountability Evaluation Brief, Implementation of the Collaborative Action Process (CAP) 2006-2007: Problem Solving Process

As noted above, the CAP and CPS models rely on nearly identical problem solving processes. In 2008, the Office of Shared Accountability evaluated CAP during the 2006-2007 school year and found a number of deficiencies in implementation. Their study of 30 schools that implemented CAP resulted in three main findings:

- Partial rather than full implementation of CAP problem-solving process and the procedures related to the process;
- Inconsistent implementation of the problem solving components across CAP teams; and
- Too much time needed to make it work.

As a result of this evaluation, MCPS discontinued central-office support for schools to implement CAP “due to the complexity of bringing the model to scale, inconsistencies in implementation across schools, and staff complaints about time, paperwork, and documentation.”⁵ Effective August 2009, MCPS also deleted reference to the CAP in all its regulations and replaced it with CPS. However, MCPS has not evaluated the implementation or effectiveness of the CPS.

3. MCPS Perspectives on Program Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement

This section describes MCPS staff perspectives on program strengths and on opportunities to improve the County's overall efforts to curb truancy and improve student attendance.

a. MCPS Perspectives on Program Strengths

During project interviews, OLO solicited MCPS staff's perceptions of what strategies seem most effective at curbing truancy. A list of the perceived strengths follows.

1. Team based approaches that enable the regular sharing of student attendance data among teachers, counselors, and student record keepers.
2. Use of a problem solving approach among broad teams of school-based professionals to identify and address the root causes of truancy.

⁵ Montgomery County Public Schools, June 2009, p. 6

3. MCPS collaboration with other agencies to address family issues (through the Collaborative Problem Solving and Educational Management Teams and the Interagency Truancy Review Board).
4. Identification of chronically absent students via attendance reports (and other methods on some campuses) to intervene early for students at highest risk for truancy.
5. Use of Tier 1 and Tier 2 strategies before referring students to the Interagency Truancy Review Board.
6. Quickly scheduling Truancy Review Board meetings for referred students.
7. Fostering one-to-one connections between students and school-based staff to enhance student engagement and interest in attending school.
8. Limited enforcement of MCPS' loss-of-credit policy on some campuses to encourage truant students to return to school.
9. Educational options for students who have dropped out or are at high risk for dropping out, such as the Gateway to College program at Montgomery College.
10. Supportive school environments, including connecting students to staff to mediate a truant student's transition back to school.
11. Use of schedule interventions as options to curb truancy, including half-day schedules and alternative classes.
12. Referrals for child care services when truancy results from lack of child care.
13. A strong communication link (including use of bilingual staff) between schools, parents, and students, particularly when the parent can ensure that a student returns to school.
14. A willingness among school-based staff and PPWs to do whatever it takes to get a student to return to school, including providing transportation.
15. Use of contracts, incentive plans, and goal setting exercises to re-engage students.
16. Use of detention to curb habitual tardiness and unexcused absences.

b. MCPS Perspectives on Opportunities for Program Improvement

Interviews with MCPS staff respondents also identified opportunities for improving MCPS' efforts to curb truancy and recommendations for enhancing these efforts. Based on interviews with MCPS staff, a summary of perceived weaknesses in MCPS' current approach to addressing truancy follows.

1. Delays by schools in referring students to the Interagency Truancy Review Board. A common perception shared among ITRB members is that too few students are referred to the Board and that students would be better served if they were referred to the Board sooner.
2. The ineffectiveness of the ITRB among some hard core truants.
3. Enforcement of the school system's loss-of-credit and academic ineligibility policies can undermine a high school's overall efforts to curb truancy.

4. Insufficient alternative educational options available for truant students, particularly hands-on and career and technical training programs, which are perceived to be of high interest to at-risk students.
5. Lack of commitment by some schools and respective staff to adopt a “whatever it takes” approach to support students’ successful return to school.
6. Not enough resources or staffing devoted to ensuring that students at-risk remain in school.
7. Correspondence sent to parents regarding their child’s truancy without additional communication (e.g., parent conferences or home visits) describing the legal and educational consequences of truancy.

In response to these perceived weaknesses in MCPS’ current efforts to curb truancy, MCPS respondents offered the following 11 recommendations for program improvement.

1. Expand educational options for habitual truants and dropouts including expanding access to the career and technical education programs at Edison High School for Technology.
2. Limit enforcement of loss of credit and academic ineligibility policies for truant students.
3. Assign case managers to focus exclusively on reducing truancy, particularly for 9th graders with a history of grade retention.
4. Target truancy reduction efforts to specific areas of the County/schools where truancy is more prevalent.
5. Enhance support to families to prevent attendance problems by investing in agencies that enhance parenting skills, particularly among elementary and middle school parents, and offering Head Start-like wrap-around services to needy families.
6. Increase awareness and partnerships across agencies to increase parents’ understanding of the state’s truancy laws and to provide supports to children.
7. Focus more truancy reduction resources on middle schools.
8. Provide more community assistance for students who dropout but still need supports (e.g., dropout recovery programs).
9. Expand pilot for the Kennedy Cluster Project to other clusters as a tool for enhancing the capacity of schools and communities to work together to preventing truancy.
10. Ensure each school has highly trained counselors and PPWs that can identify and facilitate discussions to identify the root causes of truancy, develop relationships with parents to improve attendance, and link families to resources in the community.
11. Ensure that efforts aimed at returning truant students to schools includes a commitment to enable those students to get caught up on their class work before returning to school.

B. Interagency Projects

This part describes four County interagency projects related to truancy reduction: the Interagency Truancy Review Board, the Truancy Court Project, the Kennedy Cluster Project, and the Positive Youth Development Initiative. These projects bring together staff from several Montgomery County agencies, including: Montgomery County Public Schools, the Montgomery County Police Department, the State's Attorney's Office, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Housing Opportunities Commission, and the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services.

This part is organized as follows:

- **Section 1, Interagency Truancy Review Board**, describes a multi-agency collaborative designed to improve student attendance among the hardest core habitual truancy cases;
- **Section 2, Truancy Court Pilot**, describes a new collaboration among Montgomery County agencies and the University of Baltimore School of Law to improve school attendance among students with three to ten unexcused absences;
- **Section 3, The Kennedy Cluster Project**, describes an interagency effort to identify and break down institutional barriers to academic achievement for African American students enrolled in five MCPS schools; and
- **Section 4, The Positive Youth Development Initiative**, describes a multi-agency initiative designed to reduce youth gang participation and violence in the County

Several observations emerged from OLO's review:

- The Interagency Truancy Review Board is the County's final approach to help truant students return to school before the State's Attorney's Office considers filing criminal charges against a parent or guardian.
- The expansion of the University of Baltimore School of Law's Truancy Court Program to two MCPS middle schools provides an additional Tier 2 approach to target early intervention services to chronically absent students to deter habitual truancy.
- The Kennedy Cluster Project represents a larger interagency approach to identifying at-risk students and delivering services that may address the root causes of education challenges, including truancy.
- The Positive Youth Development Initiative's approach to youth gang and violence prevention includes efforts to sustain or increase school attendance among youth targeted by the program.

1. Interagency Truancy Review Board

The Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB) was established to review the cases of habitually truant students at hearings, and works to develop plans to help students begin attending school on a regular basis. An MCPS Department of Student Services (DSS) guide describing the ITRB's mission, guidelines, and process describes the work of the ITRB as follows:

The purpose of a Truancy Review Board hearing is to motivate parents of habitually truant students to send their children to school. This hearing is essentially an “end stage” strategy when [MCPS’] sequence of interventions has failed to gain results.⁶

DSS’ Director for Pupil Personnel Services serves as the Chairperson of the ITRB. A staff member from each of the following agencies within the County and MCPS offices also serves on the ITRB:

- State’s Attorney’s Office;
- DHHS’ Child Welfare Services;
- DHHS’ School Health Services;
- DHHS’ Child & Adolescent Outpatient Mental Health Services;
- MCPD’s Family Services Division;
- MCPS’ Court Liaison;
- MCPS’ Residency and International Admissions Office;
- Housing Opportunities Commission; and
- Maryland Department of Juvenile Services.

Bringing Students to the ITRB. MCPS uses a three-tiered approach to deliver truancy prevention and intervention strategies based on the level of students’ needs. This approach is detailed above on page 31. MCPS refers some students who do not respond to lower level interventions to the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

MCPS manages all truancy reduction efforts including referrals to the Interagency Truancy Review Board. The *Montgomery County Truancy Intervention Program* guide, developed for use by MCPS and the Interagency Truancy Review Board, summarizes the process for addressing student truancy leading up to and including student referrals to the ITRB. Table 5-8 on the next page describes this process.

If a habitually truant student does not respond to school-based interventions, school principals and Pupil Personnel Workers (PPWs) can refer the student to the Interagency Truancy Review Board. MCPS requires that students receive early interventions before initiating an ITRB referral. MCPS’ Department of Student Services, however, reports that there is no established timeline for trying other interventions before initiating an ITRB referral. DSS estimates that schools try school-based interventions for two to three months before making ITRB referrals.⁷

⁶ *Montgomery County Truancy Intervention Program*, MCPS Department of Student Services, at p. 6.

⁷ Northwood High School staff report that every habitually truant student below the age of 16 at that school is referred to the ITRB.

Table 5-8. Summary of Montgomery County Truancy Intervention Process

Responsible Staff	Processes
MCPS	
School-Based Staff	<p>First Step:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify attendance concerns beginning at 10% unlawful absences Assign school-based case manager Document the following interventions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone calls and letters Consultation with staff Conferences Contracts, Incentives Consultation with PPW Utilize all available resources Referral to PPW
Pupil Personnel Workers	<p>Second Step:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PPW assumes case management and follow-up PPW documents additional interventions PPW checks attendance of siblings PPW consults with Director, if needed Director checks all documentation PPW refers case to PPW Director(for ITRB hearing)
Pupil Personnel Services Director	<p>Third Step:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate agencies and review of case (documentation review) Set hearing date Notify Review Board Members Notify Department of Juvenile Services
Maryland Department of Juvenile Services	
DJS Designee	<p>Fourth Step:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notifies parents of Truancy Review Board hearing
Interagency Truancy Review Board	
MCPS Chair Other ITRB members	<p>Fifth Step:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct hearing Identify additional resources Create attendance contract Initiate PPW follow-up Refer case to State's Attorney if warranted
State's Attorney's Office	
SAO Designee	<p>Final Step:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> File case Conduct preliminary hearing Conduct pretrial hearing Trial

Source: *Montgomery County Truancy Intervention Program*, MCPS Department of Student Services, at p. 9-14

ITRB Data. During the 2008-2009 school year, MCPS identified 984 habitually truant students. 627 (64%) were high school students. MCPS referred 43 (4.3%) students to the ITRB and 74 percent of these students had improved attendance in the semester following their referral to the ITRB.

Table 5-9 summarizes the number of students referred to the ITRB by grade, and how many students improved their attendance in the semester after their ITRB hearing.

Table 5-9. Summary of ITRB Referral and Performance Data, 2009

Grade	# of Students Referred to ITRB	Students w/ Improved Attendance in Semester Following ITRB Review	
		#	%
K	3	3	100
1	4	3	75
2	2	1	50
3	1	0	0
4	6	5	83
5	0	–	–
6	1	1	100
7	10	7	70
8	8	6	75
9	8	6	75
Total	43	32	74%

Source: MCPS' DSS

Of note, the participation in the ITRB increased student attendance on average by 12 – 13 percentage points. Whereas students averaged attendance rates of 63-67 percent prior to ITRB, average attendance increased to 76-78 percent in the semester or school year following the ITRB hearing. However, nearly half of all habitually truant students (49%) continued to be chronically absent or habitually truant following their ITRB hearing (i.e., the students still missed 20 percent or more days of school following their hearing).

ITRB Process. The Interagency Truancy Review Board meets one day a month (or two, if it has a high number of cases in a given month). The ITRB schedules a hearing for a student within one month of receiving a referral.

An ITRB hearing includes ITRB members, the student, the student's parent(s) or guardian(s), school administrator, and the PPW working with the student. Other attendees can include outside agency staff members, such as staff from DHHS' Street Outreach Network if staff have a relationship with the student.

Parents are notified of a scheduled hearing by a letter from the Department of Juvenile Services when their child is referred to the ITRB. MCPS staff prepare a School Truancy Referral packet about each student prior to the meeting, which includes all documentation of the student's truancy. The packet is distributed to all ITRB members.

Typically, PPWs contact parents/guardians before an ITRB meeting to explain the ITRB process and tell parents/guardians what to expect. A PPW will typically have made one or more home visits before an ITRB referral to try to identify and address the root causes of truancy with the student's parent or guardian.

On the day of ITRB hearings, members discuss each case before meeting with a student, to highlight the individual student's record, identify possibly strategies, and answer questions. During a hearing, a school team presents the student's case, the student and/or parents/guardians may provide a response or explanation, and ITRB members may ask questions. The ITRB then develops an "Attendance Contract" with requirements for a student and a timeline for the student to meet the requirements and/or refers the case to the State's Attorney's Office for consideration of court action.

To ensure that the student and parents/guardians understand the Board's findings and the contract:

- The ITRB chair explains the findings and the next steps;
- Parents/guardians can ask questions;
- The ITRB chair tells parents/guardians that a follow-up letter summarizing the meeting will be sent to the parents/guardians and to school staff; and
- Parents/guardians receive a copy of the Attendance Contract.

ITRB Follow-Up. Students referred to the Interagency Truancy Review Board can have their cases reviewed by the Board more than once. If a student's attendance improves after the first hearing, no update hearings are scheduled and the specific interventions are assumed to be successful. If the Board perceives that additional follow-ups are needed, or the PPW indicates that another hearing is necessary, then the ITRB schedules follow-up hearings.

Students and/or families may be offered services as a result of ITRB hearings. Examples include DHHS medical services and/or mental health services, HOC supports, and access to the State's Attorney's Office's family violence prevention services. School-based services may include lunch-time tutoring, mentoring, and after-school academic programs.

If a student's attendance does not improve following the ITRB process, the ITRB will typically refer the case to the State's Attorney's Office for criminal prosecution of the parents/guardians. Similarly, if a student fails to attend ITRB hearings on multiple occasions, the Board will refer the case for criminal prosecution.

Service referrals in an ITRB Attendance Contract are similar to MCPS' Tier 2 strategies offered by school-based problem solving teams prior to a student's referral to the Board. According to Department of Student Services staff, parents/guardians often do not utilize referrals for services or family counseling before referral to the ITRB. Because the ITRB is seen as a last chance before truancy-related criminal charges are filed, parents are often more willing to utilize services after referral to the ITRB.

Perceptions of the ITRB. Staff from the agencies that sit on the ITRB expressed a variety of opinions about the Board's operation, including:

- The members of the ITRB are very dedicated to helping students.
- The ITRB brings together all parties that need to be involved in the discussion and services from a variety of agencies to try to address the basis for an individual student's truancy.
- The ITRB is designed to help families, rather than as a punitive action.

Staff also offered perceptions of issues faced by the ITRB and its process, including:

- Students brought before the ITRB often have a truancy rate much higher than 20 percent and already have been offered (and often rejected) services.
- The ITRB only sees a small minority of habitually truant students.
- The agencies on the ITRB do not have the necessary resources to address the magnitude of mental health issues faced by ITRB students and families.
- Regardless of other agencies' involvement in the ITRB process, the ultimate responsibility of case management for the student always returns to an MCPS staff member (i.e., the PPW).
- The ITRB is often limited in its options for helping students because, ultimately, the decision to address truancy problems usually lies with students' parents or guardian.

2. Montgomery County Truancy Court Program

The University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Family, Children and the Courts established the Truancy Court Program (TCP) in 2005.⁸ The law school partners with school systems in Maryland to work with truant students in school settings to provide mentoring, character-building classes, family mediation, and incentives to encourage students with truancy problems to attend school regularly. The first school system to participate in the Truancy Court Program was Baltimore City Public Schools.

Individual schools (elementary or middle schools) are chosen to participate in the program. The program consists of two or three ten-week sessions each school year, with participating schools recommending 10 to 15 students per session for participation. The program targets students with between five and 20 unexcused absences during a school year (i.e., absence rates of 3-10 percent).

Law school staff recruit judges (active or retired) to volunteer their time and meet individually with students at school on a weekly basis. The program also employs a mentor for each school system to work with the students. Students meet for about 10 minutes weekly with a judge, a mentor, and law school staff and students. In addition to this individual meeting with each student, students (and parents) participate in a mentoring program with character-building classes and individual mentoring. Students who participate in the program receive weekly incentives, such as books or \$1 gift cards to McDonalds.

Students graduate from the program at the end of a session if they decrease their unexcused absences by 75 percent. If students do not graduate, they can return to the program for the next ten-week session.

⁸ The program is modeled on a Truancy Court program established in 1997 in Louisville, Kentucky.

Truancy Court Pilot in Montgomery County. Through \$500,000 in new federal funding secured by Senator Barbara Mikulski in 2009, the Truancy Court Program is expanding into Montgomery, Baltimore, Anne Arundel, and Prince George’s Counties. Beginning in February 2010, Key Middle School in Silver Spring and Neelsville Middle School in Germantown will host the TCP. These middle schools had the highest 2009 habitual truancy rates of all MCPS middle schools and also had high numbers of students with unexcused absences more than 10 percent of the time in the first part of the 2009-2010 school year.

Table 5-10 summarizes these middle schools’ habitual truancy rates and chronic absenteeism rates.

Table 5-10. Percent of Students Habitually Truant and Chronically Absent at Neelsville and Key Middle Schools, 2006-2009

Middle School	2006	2007	2008	2009
Habitual Truancy (% of students with unexcused absences 20% or more of the time)				
Neelsville	0	4.0	3.1	3.4
Key	0.6	0.9	2.4	2.2
Chronic Absenteeism (% of students absent 20 days or more)				
Neelsville	13.7	13.0	12.1	11.6
Key	11.1	11.4	14.0	14.9

Source: MSDE Habitual Truancy Reports, 2006-2008; MCPS submission 2009; FY10 CIP for enrollment; Maryland Report Card

The funding will allow the TCP to operate in each of these schools for three semesters. Montgomery County’s TCP is being established through the cooperation of the University of Baltimore School of Law, MCPS, the Montgomery County Council, and the State’s Attorney’s Office.

3. Kennedy Cluster Project

The Kennedy Cluster Project is a joint effort between Montgomery County Public Schools and the County Government to create a model for delivering services that will significantly improve the academic achievement of African American students in MCPS’ Kennedy High School cluster. The lead County Government agency in this partnership is the Department of Health and Human Services. The project’s vision is to “support children, families and communities so that student achievement is no longer predictable by social determinants such as race/ethnicity and socio-economic status.”

The project is working to accomplish its goals by increasing the use of equitable practices in schools, improving student health and well-being, and fostering more parent engagement in schools.

The five schools that make up the Kennedy Cluster have a total enrollment of approximately 3,500 students. They are:

- Kennedy High School;
- Argyle Middle School;
- Bel Pre Elementary School;
- Georgian Forest Elementary School; and
- Strathmore Elementary School.

The table below compares demographic data about residents living in the Kennedy Cluster to residents of the County as a whole.

Table 5-11. Comparative Demographic Data for the Kennedy Cluster and Montgomery County

Demographic	Kennedy Cluster	Montgomery County
Adults have high school diploma or less	55%	41%
Adults have a BA/BS degree	22%	27%
Adults have a graduate degree	18%	28%
Individual born outside the U.S.	37%	27%
Children live in a single-parent family	30%	18%
Students receive free and reduced-priced meals (FARMS)	49%	26%

Source: June 2009 PowerPoint presentation on the Kennedy Cluster Project

County agencies involved in creating and supporting the Kennedy Cluster Project include the:

- Montgomery County Council;
- Office of the County Executive;
- Montgomery County Public Schools;*
- Montgomery County Board of Education;
- Department of Health and Human Services;*
- Department of Recreation;*
- Department of Housing and Community Affairs;
- Montgomery County Police Department;*
- Montgomery County Public Libraries;
- Montgomery County Regional Services Centers;
- State's Attorney's Office;*
- Interagency Coordinating Board;
- Collaboration Council; and
- Maryland Department of Juvenile Services.*

The agencies or departments marked above with an asterisk have entered into a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU) to allow for easier sharing of information related to the project among these agencies. The MOU seeks to “eliminate communication barriers between and among MCPS and County departments and agencies” to facilitate the work of the project.

Examples of objectives or activities implemented or recommended for the Kennedy Cluster Project include:

- Focusing MCPS “professional development on topics of institutional racism, equitable classroom practices, and growing an internal culture of high expectations;”
- Providing a half-time parent outreach coordinator in each school;
- Prioritizing vision/hearing screenings and immunization clinic scheduling based on FARMS rates;
- Expanded after-school activity bus services;
- A summer free lunch program open to all students in the Kennedy Cluster;
- Increasing universal preschool opportunities for all three- and four-year-olds;
- Conducting family resource fairs to provide information and access to services; and
- Creating summer youth employment opportunities.⁹

⁹ Yao V., Memorandum to Montgomery County Council Health and Human Services and Education Committees, December 2, 2008, p. 2-3.

Many staff interviewed by OLO praised the concept and the work of the Kennedy Cluster Project. Some staff suggested that it could become a model to be replicated elsewhere because the project is developing criteria and mechanisms for school personnel to identify students at-risk for failure and provide needed resources. Other staff commented that the project's approach will allow MCPS to focus on students' needs earlier than MCPS' current system allows.

4. Positive Youth Development Initiative

According to County Government materials, "[t]he Positive Youth Development Initiative is a comprehensive response to the problems of gangs and youth violence in the County, and reflects the commitment by the County to an approach that includes prevention, intervention, and suppression components." The Positive Youth Development Initiative (PYDI) uses a three-tiered approach of prevention, intervention, and suppression to target services to youth.

The PYDI identifies outcome goals for each program level. One outcome goal from the "prevention" tier is sustained or increased school attendance. The table below describes the youth targeted through each level of services and the agencies that provide the services.

Table 5-12. Summary of Positive Youth Development Initiative Framework

Approach	Targeted Youth	Service Providers	Examples of Services/Activities
Prevention	Youth who would benefit from safe, well-staffed, and instructive after school programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department of Recreation Mont. County Public Libraries MCPS DHHS Non-profit partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rec Extra Sports Academies Wellness Center Excel Beyond the Bell Summer Youth Employment Street Outreach Network Family Intervention Specialist
Intervention	Youth who engage in risky behavior, including committing gang crime or community violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DHHS MCPD Non-profit partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth Opportunity Center Street Outreach Network Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator Family Intervention Specialist
Suppression	Youth who continue to engage in illegal and violent behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department of Corrections MCPD State's Attorney's Office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrests Investigations Prosecution Rehabilitations

Source: September 5, 2008 CountyStat PowerPoint presentation on the PYDI; DHHS

PYDI outcome goals include:

Prevention	Sustained or increased school attendance Improved connectedness to family, school and community Increased ability to make positive life choices Improved sense of self Increased parental and community capacity to support youth in the County
Intervention	Reduction in suspensions and expulsions Reduction in criminal behavior and re-arrests Reduction in gang activity Multi-disciplinary system that responds effectively to support youth and families
Suppression	Analysis of arrest data that relates to juvenile crime Diversion program participation Analysis of gang activity in identified areas: Long Branch, Bel Pre, and Gunners Branch

C. Montgomery County Criminal Justice Agencies

This part summarizes the work of three criminal justice agencies that interact with truant students, and describes each agency's interactions. These agencies are the Montgomery County Police Department, the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office, and the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. Each of these agencies has a representative on the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

This part is organized as follows:

- **Section 1** describes the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) ;
- **Section 2** describes the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office (SAO); and
- **Section 3** describes the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS).

The following observations emerged from OLO's review:

- Interviews with staff indicate that all three criminal justice agencies feel limited in the actions they can take to help reduce student truancy. These perceived limitations result in part from state laws that criminally prosecute parents and guardians rather than students for truancy.
- None of the criminal justice agencies currently operate truancy diversion programs locally.
- DJS has the authority to target services to habitual truants by petitioning the courts to declare them to be Children in Need of Supervision. DJS, however, but does not have the manpower to implement this authority in Montgomery County and views truancy as an MCPS issue.
- The SAO in coordination with MCPS and the University of Baltimore's School of Law will begin a truancy court program in two MCPS middle schools in February 2010.

1. Montgomery County Police Department

Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) officers interact with truant students primarily through the department's Educational Facilities Officers (EFO) Program. The EFO program is housed in MCPD's Field Services Bureau. MCPD also has a representative from the Family Crimes Division on the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

EFOs are MCPD officers assigned to work at and with specific MCPS schools. An EFO's "primary function is to maintain and enhance a safe and secure learning environment for students and staff in Montgomery County." EFOs also:

- Coordinate MCPD's response to incidents and reports of criminal activity;
- Serve as a link between MCPS and MCPD;
- Coordinate MCPD and joint MCPD/MCPS activities and programs in the schools;
- Participate in school based safety committees; and
- Meet regularly with MCPS staff, students, and parents, to exchange information and assess risk factors relating to emergency preparedness.

Each of MCPS' 25 comprehensive high schools (and associated cluster of middle schools) is assigned one EFO, and two EFOs are assigned directly to Martin Luther King and Argyle middle schools – for a total of 27 EFOs.

MCPD staff report that officers' ability to help address truancy is limited because MCPD officers have virtually no authority in either state or local law to detain or transport truant students (back to school or elsewhere).¹⁰ Each EFO addresses truancy differently – in a collaborative manner with staff from his or her assigned school(s). For example, some EFOs accompany PPWs on home visits to truant students. Some refer students and families to County Government services, such as DHHS' Crisis Center.

OLO met with MCPD staff, including several EFOs. These staff report several additional challenges to addressing student truancy, including inconsistent attention to taking attendance in schools; and the absence of non-punitive alternative schools in the County. MCPD staff also offered several recommendations to improve the effectiveness of County truancy prevention efforts, including:

- Targeting student attendance issues at younger ages, particularly in middle school;
- Enhancing alternative programs for truant students;
- Reducing the lag between identifying problem behavior (e.g., truancy) and responding to it;
- Working with community-based and parent groups (e.g., Identity, Inc., NAACP Parents' Council, etc.) to emphasize the importance of students staying in school; and
- Having MCPS provide attendance data to MCPD daily to allow officers to verify school attendance for students in programs that require school attendance (e.g., Teen Court) and to investigate crimes.

¹⁰ Under state law, a police officer can *only* take a child into custody under four circumstances: 1) pursuant to a court order, 2) if the officer is arresting the child, 3) if there are "reasonable grounds to believe that the child is in immediate danger . . . and removal is necessary for the child's protection," or 4) if there are "reasonable grounds to believe that the child has run away" Annotated Code of Maryland, Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 3-8A-14(a).

MCPD staff often interact with truant students as they investigate crimes, particularly those committed during school hours. Table 5-13 summarizes juvenile arrest data from FY06 to FY08 and shows that:

- Juvenile arrests increased by 23% from 1,596 in FY06 to 1,962 in FY08;
- Juvenile arrests accounted for 48% of total arrests for robbery and 39% of total arrests for motor vehicle thefts in FY08; and
- Between FY06 and FY08 juvenile arrests increased for larceny, drug possession, robbery, motor vehicle theft, vandalism, liquor law violations, and other assaults while arrests decreased for burglary, aggravated assault, drug sales, and other offenses.

Table 5-13. Montgomery County Arrests of Juveniles under Age 18, FY06-FY08

Offense	FY08 Juvenile Arrests as % of Total	Total Juvenile Arrests			
		FY06	FY07	FY08	% Change
Larceny – Theft	22%	305	377	439	44%
Drugs - Possession	19%	265	279	368	39%
Robbery	48%	142	218	242	70%
Burglary - Breaking or Entering	25%	205	243	150	-27%
Motor Vehicle Theft	39%	82	103	105	28%
Other Assaults	9%	93	112	104	12%
Weapons: Carrying, Possessing, etc.	32%	124	113	97	-22%
Liquor Laws	55%	2	122	96	4,700%
Aggravated Assault	19%	90	115	71	-21%
Vandalism	27%	38	71	58	53%
Drugs - Sale/Manufacturing	10%	49	71	47	-4%
All Other Offenses	2%	201	212	185	-8%
Total	12%	1,596	2,036	1,962	23%

*Sorted by FY08 data

Source: MCPD

2. Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office

The Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office (SAO) investigates and prosecutes individuals accused of breaking state and local laws, including the prosecution of parents of habitually truant students. The State's Attorney's Office has had a participant on the Interagency Truancy Review Board since its inception. Currently, the leader of the Community Prosecution Team fulfills this role.

If a case is referred by the ITRB to the SAO for court prosecution, that one case may result in charges being filed against more than one person. As noted in Chapter II, Maryland law provides that a parent or legal guardian is required, under penalty of law, to ensure that their child between the ages of 5 and 16 regularly attends school or receives instruction. Violations of this law are punishable by monetary fines or serving time in jail.

The SAO's Community Prosecution Team, with four attorneys, is responsible for prosecuting parents of habitually truant students. SAO staff report that since 2005, the Office has filed charges against parents and/or guardians on 55 occasions. Typically, the SAO only files charges in truancy cases after a family has gone through the ITRB process without any improvement of the student's attendance.

The State's Attorney's Office prosecutes truancy cases in District Court. Truancy case witnesses consist of MCPS personnel who can provide evidence of student's truancy. Truancy cases typically are resolved with a guilty plea, a trial, or a "stet," where a trial is indefinitely postponed, but the prosecutor may reopen the case at any time.

3. Maryland Department of Juvenile Services

The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services [DJS] provides care and treatment to youth who have violated the law, or who are a danger to themselves or others. DJS coordinates and operates prevention and early-intervention programs, non-residential community-based programs, and residential programs. A DJS representative also sits on the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

DJS has two offices in Montgomery County and offers access to programs for youth that include: anger management counseling, sex offender treatment, drug and alcohol education, outpatient substance abuse programs, youth mentoring, family preservation services, and gang outreach activities. DJS' residential facility in Montgomery County is the Alfred D. Noyes Center.

Youth are referred to DJS either by the police or citizens. Referrals can be resolved in three ways:

- DJS can close a case and offer a warning;
- DJS can recommend pre-court/informal services; and
- DJS can recommend filing charges in court.

While DJS does not focus specifically on truancy, youth who receive informal services often sign a contract that requires school attendance. Youth recommended to court often receive probation, with school attendance as one of the conditions of probation. While DJS staff monitor compliance with conditions of probation, they do not monitor the attendance of youth who have received informal services.

Statewide, DJS classifies all youth referred for status offenses¹¹ (i.e., truancy, running away from home, ungovernable) as a Child in Need of Supervision (CINS) *referral* at the intake level. Montgomery County's DJS does not file formal CINS *petitions* in Juvenile Court for truancy-related cases for two reasons: (1) DJS does not have the resources to focus on cases related exclusively to truancy; and (2) DJS perceives truancy as a family problem that is most appropriately addressed by MCPS. Statewide, very few youth are formally referred to Juvenile Court to be adjudicated as CINS cases.

¹¹ A status offense is an offense that is criminal only because the individual is not an adult.

DJS' CINS referrals typically come from parents and schools. DJS can execute an informal contract with these youth; however, non-compliance with a contract will not result in DJS filing a formal CINS petition in court. Table 5-14 compares the number of truancy-related intake cases brought to DJS in Montgomery County to other Maryland counties for FY05 through FY08.

Table 5-14. Summary of Truancy-Related Intake Cases by County, FY05-FY08

Maryland County	Truancy-Related Intake Cases			
	FY05	FY06	FY07	FY08
Montgomery	0	0	0	0
Prince George's	142	299	698	496
Carroll	48	38	29	29
Frederick	29	34	29	27
Allegany	37	26	27	21
Washington			9	21
Garrett	13	12	8	13
Anne Arundel		1		4
Caroline	1	1		1
Queen Anne's	4	1	1	1
Baltimore City	2	2	18	
Worcester	1	11	2	
Baltimore County			2	
Wicomico		1		
Charles	3			
Dorchester	2			

Source: Department of Juvenile Services' Annual Statistical Reports, FY05-FY08

DJS staff made several recommendations to improve the effectiveness of County truancy prevention efforts, including:

- Increasing funding for pre-court services and programs;
- Targeting students at younger ages, particularly in elementary and middle school;
- Focusing on ways to improve parenting skills; and
- Reducing the size of schools to enhance students' attachment to school.

D. Department of Health and Human Services and the Housing Opportunities Commission

This part summarizes the work of the Department of Health and Human Services and the Housing Opportunities Commission to provide programs, services, and assistance to children and youth who may have truancy problems. Overwhelmingly, staff at both agencies reported that truancy is often a *symptom* of other problems in children's and youth's lives, such as physical abuse, neglect, poverty, mental health issues, gang involvement, and substance abuse.

This part is organized as follows:

- **Section 1** describes the Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) programs; and
- **Section 2** describes the Housing Opportunities Commission's (HOC) programs

The following observations emerged from OLO's review:

- Neither DHHS nor HOC operate truancy diversion programs focused exclusively on improving school attendance among chronically absent or habitually truant youth.
- Both agencies, however, often work directly and indirectly with truant and chronically absent youth to address the root causes of truancy.
- DHHS operates several programs within County schools that directly or indirectly address truancy. These include staffing the schools with nurses and health technicians and sponsorship of Linkages to Learning sites that provide physical and mental health services.
- DHHS' Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, and Gang Prevention units also deliver programs and services that indirectly address the root causes of truancy.
- The HOC offers social services to its residents, and via its four Family Resource Centers, offers programming and services that support school engagement and indirectly reduce truancy.

1. Department of Health and Human Services

Two DHHS service areas oversee this agency's programs and services related to truancy – Children, Youth & Family Services and Public Health Services. A staff member from each of these two service areas serves on the Interagency Truancy Review Board. A staff member from DHHS' Child & Adolescent Outpatient Mental Health Services also serves on this board.

a. DHHS' Focus on Truancy

OLO heard common themes from staff across DHHS' programs when they were asked to identify issues that can lead to or exacerbate truancy problems. Themes included:

- Barriers to and limited parent involvement in their children's education;
- Lack of student engagement in school;
- Limited MCPS alternatives for students who do not succeed academically or are not college-bound;
- Youth (and family) mental health issues and too few options for addressing these issues; and
- Family economic issues (e.g., school-aged children providing daycare for younger children, students working to help support their families).

At the same time, program staff identified several truancy prevention strategies, including:

- Engaging parents in their children's education;
- Educational alternatives (i.e., evening options, alternative education models, daycare options);
- Identifying truant students and intervening before truancy becomes a chronic issue; and
- Mentoring programs.

b. DHHS Program Descriptions

This section described the five DHHS programs that provide services to students that may have truancy issues. The table below lists the DHHS five programs with staff who may interact with truant students.

Table 5-15. DHHS Programs that Interact with Truant Students

DHHS Service Area	Program Area(s)
Children, Youth & Family Services	Child Welfare Services Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Positive Youth Development Juvenile Justice Services Linkages to Learning
Public Health Services	School Health Services

Child Welfare Services. DHHS' Child Welfare Services (CWS) has several programs that work to protect children, including abused and neglected children. Child Welfare Services investigates allegations of child maltreatment, oversees foster care and adoption in the County, and provides services for children and families in homes where abuse or neglect has occurred.

While CWS does not focus specifically on truancy, many children who come to the attention of CWS have truancy problems. CWS will, among other things:

- Inform the ITRB whether students have open cases in DHHS' state database, which tracks all child welfare referrals and investigations;
- Coordinate with MCPS staff on investigations and open CWS cases;
- Provide consultations to MCPS staff on whether specific issues are reportable to CWS; and
- Refer families to Child Protective Services for investigation (3 to 6 per year) and/or family assessment services when there is a concern about neglect contributing to truancy.

Child Welfare Services is one of two DHHS programs that have representatives on the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Positive Youth Development. DHHS' Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator oversees the County Government's youth gang prevention and intervention efforts. The primary program – the Street Outreach Network – works “to prevent, neutralize, and control hostile behavior in high risk youth and youth gangs through the development of positive relationships between youth/community stakeholders and the outreach workers.”

While the Street Outreach Network (SON) staff do not focus directly on truancy, their work often brings them in contact with truants. If SON staff have a relationship with a student that has been referred to the Interagency Truancy Review Board, SON staff members will attend ITRB hearings for those students.

Youth are referred to the SON from a variety of sources, including Educational Facilities Officers, pupil personnel workers, school counselors, school administrators, MCPD's Gang Task Force,¹² and the State's Attorney's Office. SON staff interact with youth in numerous ways that include:

- Developing relationships with Montgomery County youth and connecting them to community resources, services, and opportunities;
- Sponsoring youth engagement groups in certain middle schools and high schools;
- Occasionally helping relocate youth facing threats in the community;
- Engaging kids in after-school programs that provide training in areas such as photography, disk jockeying, and alternatives to graffiti; and
- Working with the Wheaton Intervention Partnership and Down County and Up County Intervention Partnerships, which are collaborative partnerships of MCPD, the State's Attorney's Office, MCPS PPWs, non-profit organizations, and others that focus on engaging and maintaining intervention with a small group of youth habitual offenders.

SON also partners with local non-profit organizations to provide services to at-risk youth, including Identity, Inc., the YMCA, Pride Youth Services, Inc., and the Family Support Center.

SON staff also partner with the Crossroads Youth Opportunity and the Northwood Wellness Centers to support intervention and prevention services, respectively. Both programs are DHHS collaborations with non-profit partners, and both programs often serve youth who have truancy issues. Case managers work closely with youth and parents to address truancy issues.

Juvenile Justice Services. Juvenile Justice Services (JJS) is a component of DHHS' Children, Youth & Family Services, providing planning, coordination and support services for all juvenile justice activities in DHHS. Among other services, JJS operates the Screening and Assessment Services for Children and Adolescents (SASCA) – which acts as a gateway for other DHHS mental health and substance abuse services for children and adolescents.

Like DHHS' Child Welfare Services and gang prevention initiatives, JJS does not specifically target efforts toward truant students, although many of the children and adolescents referred to JJS have truancy problems. JJS and SASCA receive referrals from the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, MCPD's Family Crimes Division, MCPS, the Public Defender, and the Teen Court¹³ program.

Children and adolescents referred to SASCA undergo an assessment that includes behavioral health, substance abuse, and mental health assessments; and an examination of school, family, and peer issues. SASCA then makes referrals to a variety of services, such as contract-based substance abuse education and outpatient treatment or DHHS' Child and Adolescent Mental Health Clinic.

¹² MCPD's Gang Task Force is in MCPD Special Investigations Division's Criminal Enterprise Section.

¹³ The Teen Court program is a diversion program for first-time offenders between the ages of 12 and 17 where teen peers evaluate criminal charges against teens and impose penalties. Montgomery County's Teen Court program is a collaboration among the State's Attorney's Office, MCPD, MCPS, the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, the criminal defense bar, and volunteer judges.

Linkages to Learning. Created in 1993, Linkages to Learning (“Linkages”) is a school-based health and human services program that provides and/or refers students and families to mental health, physical health, social, and educational support services. DHHS manages the Linkages program in collaboration with MCPS and four major partner providers – the City of Rockville, GUIDE Youth Services, Kensington Wheaton Youth Services (a program of the Mental Health Association), and YMCA Youth & Family Services. Site staff partner with a variety of non-profit and community-based service providers. Linkages’ seeks to break down barriers that prevent access to services.

In 2009, Linkages had 28 school-based sites (7 middle schools; 20 elementary schools; 1 cluster model). Staff at each school site assess their school community’s needs to tailor services appropriately. Services vary from site to site and can include:

- Homework assistance;
- Mentoring;
- Parenting help;
- Adult education classes (ESOL, literacy computers);
- Health counseling and education;
- After school programs; and
- Expanded school health services (at 5 specialized School-Based Health Center sites).

Several programs or services offered by or through Linkages to Learning address truancy or truancy-related issues. Examples include:

- Child/Family therapy for those whose truancy stems from mental health issues or family situations;
- Parent groups, which teach parents about school attendance requirements, positive discipline and truancy prevention techniques;
- Student social skills groups, which may address issues such as bullying;
- After-school programs, which can help students feel more connected to school and increase school attendance; and
- Transition programs to help ease students’ transition from elementary to middle school or middle to high school.

Regardless of income, any student and member of their family at a Linkages school can access services. Students are referred to the program primarily through school counselors, teachers, and administrators. Staff from Linkages report that the program focuses on preventing issues from arising by working to connect parents and students to school.

School Health Services. School Health Services (SHS) provides School Community Health Nurses (registered nurses) and School Health Room Aides (certified nursing assistants) to all public schools in Montgomery County. This year, approximately 320 nurses and aides work in MCPS schools, with each nurse responsible for between one and three schools.

In addition, SHS nurses staff six school-based Health/Wellness Centers that operate in five MCPS elementary schools and one high school. SHS school-based staff also deliver health-related services through the Linkages to Learning program in schools that have Linkages sites.

SHS staff provide a variety of health and health-related services to MCPS students, including first aid and emergency care, hearing and vision screenings, health education, teen pregnancy prevention, and case management for students with chronic health conditions and risky behaviors. Additionally, at MCPS' request, a SHS staff member (a manager) participates on the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

SHS' services bring staff into direct contact with students who have truancy issues. For example, SHS staff report that certain physical and mental health issues that bring students to a school nurse may lead to or exacerbate truancy, including school phobia, anxiety disorders, and stress. SHS staff also lead or collaborate with student groups seeking to engage students who are truant or are at risk for truancy.¹⁴

Because SHS staff are school-based, some principals include school nurses in Educational Management Teams discussions (described above on page 38) if a student under discussion has a physical or mental health issue. In addition, EFOs occasionally will request help from SHS school-based staff to address a particular student's truancy issues.

2. Housing Opportunities Commission

The Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) is Montgomery County's housing finance agency and its public housing authority. HOC owns over 6,000 housing units in the County that are occupied by low-income residents and oversees a federal program that provides housing vouchers for another 5,600 households with low-income, elderly, and disabled residents.

HOC offers services to its residents, including families with children who have truancy issues, and an HOC staff member participates on the Interagency Truancy Review Board. HOC services include resident counselors at HOC sites who will meet with a family if a child is referred to the ITRB. These counselors intervene in crises and refer HOC residents to available resources from other programs.

HOC also operates Family Resource Centers at four HOC sites in the County (two in Gaithersburg, and one each in Olney and Germantown). Among other things, these centers run after-school programs, have computer labs, and run Boy Scout and Girl Scout groups. While HOC families living in other HOC facilities may access the Family Resource Centers, HOC does not publicize programming to off-site residents because HOC does not have the resources to provide services to every family.

Approximately 10,000 children live in HOC housing, and HOC staff estimate that approximately one third of students that come before the ITRB live in HOC housing. HOC staff report that HOC's participation on the ITRB provides some leverage with HOC students that come before the Board.

Language both in HOC's leases and in contracts signed by families that receive federal housing vouchers allow for eviction and termination of a lease if someone in the household is convicted of a crime. Because parents of habitually truant students face possible criminal prosecution, families can face eviction if a parent is convicted of a crime because of a child's habitual truancy. However, according to HOC staff, this has never occurred.

¹⁴ E.g., Gang prevention groups and pregnancy prevention groups.

Chapter VI: Maryland's Practices for Reducing Truancy

This chapter describes a variety of initiatives in Maryland to address student truancy. These descriptions rely primarily on the Maryland Department of Legislative Services' (DLS) October 2008 report, *Approaches to Solving the Problem of Truancy*. DLS found that primarily the local school systems, and in some counties, a truancy court pilot program funded by the General Assembly, address truancy across the state. DLS also found that the Department of Juvenile Services rarely uses its authority to bring habitual truants to juvenile court via Child in Need of Supervision petitions.

Information on Maryland's truancy practices is presented in four sections.

- **Part A** describes statewide approaches to reduce truancy;
- **Part B** describes state-funded approaches to reduce truancy in local jurisdictions;
- **Part C** describes local school system-funded approaches to reduce truancy; and
- **Part D** describes other local initiatives to reduce truancy.

Several observations emerge from OLO's review:

- The state has focused on curbing truancy statewide by requiring schools to use positive behavioral supports if they have high rates of truancy and ending out of school suspensions for attendance offenses. The state has also funded truancy diversion programs (e.g., truancy courts and CINS pilot projects) in several jurisdictions to curb truancy.
- Several Maryland jurisdictions have funded truancy diversion programs that rely on cross-agency collaboration among schools, law enforcement, DJS, and State's Attorneys' Offices.
- Local schools of law in Baltimore (University of Baltimore and University of Maryland) have partnered with Baltimore City Public Schools to implement truancy diversion programs.

A. Statewide Approaches to Reduce Truancy

Statewide, the Maryland State Department of Education, the General Assembly, and the Governor's Office for Children have all undertaken efforts to address habitual truancy. A summary of these statewide approaches follows.

- **Positive behavioral interventions and supports:** Maryland law requires schools with truancy rates that exceed a certain percent of their enrollment (reduced annually until it reaches one percent in 2012-2013) to implement Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) programs or similar behavior modification programs.¹ More than one third of Maryland's public schools are actively implementing PBIS, including Montgomery County Public Schools.
- **Maryland task force on raising the compulsory public school attendance age to 18:** This task force, established in state law, concluded its work in December 2007. The task force did not recommend increasing the compulsory attendance age, but did encourage the use of alternative paths to high school graduation and recommended consideration of establishing a truancy court program in each county.

¹ PBIS refers to programs that systematically teach and encourage students' positive behavior in schools to create a productive and beneficial school environment. See page 6, Table 2.1 for description of annual thresholds.

The task force found that Maryland has no established system of support and consequences for frequently truant students and that prosecutors rarely filed truancy-related criminal charges against a parent or guardian. Of note, the Montgomery County Board of Education recently endorsed raising the age of compulsory school attendance.²

- **Learner's driving permits:** As of October 1, 2007, a student under the age of 16 with more than 10 unexcused absences during the prior school semester may not obtain a learner's permit to drive. However, because students must be 15 years and 9 months old to get a learner's permit and because Maryland law requires school attendance only until age 16, in effect, a truant student will only be prohibited from getting a learner's permit for up to three months.
- **Ending suspensions for attendance offenses:** As of July 1, 2009, state law prohibits Maryland public school officials from issuing out-of-school suspensions³ or expelling students solely for chronic lateness or unexcused absences. According to the Maryland State Department of Education, more than 16,500 students statewide were suspended for attendance offenses in the 2007-2008 school year – nearly 10 percent of total suspensions.⁴
- **Communities Against Truancy Project:** Through a grant from the Governor's Office on Crime Control and Prevention, the Cecil County Local Management Board has initiated the Communities against Truancy Project to gather and share information on truancy program development, resources, and best practices.⁵ Local Management Boards across the state have been invited to join this collaborative, including the Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families. This partnership seeks to:
 - Compare truancy reduction programs and disseminate throughout the state information on promising truancy reduction practices;
 - Establish state and local baseline data on truancy in Maryland, including risk and protective factors; and
 - Develop Prevention Policy Boards in regions throughout the state to meet and discuss community resources to combat truancy.

B. State-Funded Approaches to Reduce Truancy in Local Jurisdictions

In addition to the statewide approaches described above, the General Assembly has also provided support to specific jurisdictions to implement truancy courts, CINS pilot projects, and a truancy reduction project. Information about these approaches and their outcomes is based primarily on the Maryland Department of Legislative Services' *Approaches to Solving the Problem of Truancy*.

² Resolution 453-09, October 26, 2009

³ Under the new law, in-school-suspensions for attendance offenses, such as after-school detention, are allowed. Smitherman, L, "School Suspensions Limited in Maryland" Baltimore Sun, July 1, 2009

⁴ In MCPS, 787 students were suspended for attendance related offenses. Source: Maryland Public School Suspensions, 2007-2008, Maryland State Department of Education

⁵ Communities Against Truancy Project Overview, Cecil Partnerships for Children, Youth, and Families

- **Truancy court pilot program:** Beginning in 2004, a Maryland law authorized a three-year pilot truancy reduction program in the juvenile courts of Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester Counties. In 2007, the pilot was extended to Harford and Prince George's Counties. Families of truant students enter this program when a school official files a civil petition in court. For students under the age of 12, officials must file and dismiss or suspend criminal charges against the student's legal custodian prior to participation in the program.

Under the program, the court may order the student to: attend school; perform community service; attend individual or family counseling; attend substance abuse evaluation and treatment; attend mental health evaluation and treatment; or comply with a court-set curfew. The court also reviews family assessment findings to determine appropriate services. Participants can graduate after 90 days in the program with no unexcused absences. A 2007 evaluation report to the General Assembly found that approximately 43 percent of program participants successfully completed the program.

- **CINS pilot project in Baltimore City and Baltimore County:** In 2005, the General Assembly established a five-year Child in Needs of Supervision (CINS) Pilot Program in Baltimore City and Baltimore County under the jurisdiction of DJS to divert youth from the juvenile justice system. Under this pilot, DJS must refer an alleged CINS for comprehensive family-focused assessments and service planning. The length of the program is three to six months, depending on needed services.

A December 31, 2007 report found that at 6 and 12 months, fewer juveniles have had fewer contacts with DJS than expected. Notwithstanding the program's promising results, a workgroup⁶ expressed "concerns that (the) CINS pilot, if brought to scale would open the flood gate to all kinds of kids and overwhelm the system and that schools would refer (more children) to DJS."⁷

- **Project Attend in Anne Arundel County:** DJS funds this local program while the public schools fund its sister Baltimore County program. In these programs, students up to age 15 are referred by a pupil personnel worker for a hearing at the District Court when previous interventions are ineffective. At the hearing, a DJS hearing officer explains truancy laws and possible sanctions to parents and asks parents to sign an attendance monitoring agreement. Anne Arundel County parents are also asked to agree to mental health and substance abuse screenings for the child and a health department assessment for other services.

Program students sign a daily attendance log that is tracked by the program's coordinator. The coordinator maintains contact with the parent and the child and recommends follow-up hearings if attendance does not improve. Anne Arundel's program is 90 days and may be extended on a case-by-case basis. According to DLS, in 2007-2008, 61 percent of the 270 students referred to the program had an overall decline in their absence rates.

⁶ The Child and Family Services Interagency Strategic Plan Access and Continuum of Care Workgroup (CFSIW)

⁷ CFSIW February 4, 2008 notes available on-line at

<http://www.ocyf.state.md.us/PDF/Appendices/AppendixC/PartnersCouncilWorkgroupMeetingNotes/AccessandContinuumofCare/AccessContinuum2408.pdf>

C. Local School System Funded Approaches to Reduce Truancy

Baltimore City and Prince George's County Public Schools locally fund truancy reduction programs in partnership with law enforcement. Carroll and Anne Arundel Counties both have truancy reduction program partnerships with the DJS and the State's Attorney's Office. These strategies are summarized below.

Baltimore City Public Schools:

- **Truancy Assessment Center:** From November 2003 to July 2008, Baltimore City Public Schools operated a Truancy Assessment Center focused on reducing habitual truancy among middle school students. Police officers transported truant students during the school day to the center where guidance counselors, DJS staff, and local department of social services staff would evaluate a child's needs for mental health counseling, academic tutoring, medical care, housing, or other services. The center also accepted referrals from schools that had exhausted efforts to get a student to return to school. The center had responsibility for filing truancy-related criminal charges against parents.

Prince George's County Public Schools:

- **Anti-Truancy Campaign and Collaboration with Law Enforcement:** In 2008, the Prince George's Board of Education launched a public awareness campaign against truancy and forged a partnership with local law enforcement to encourage the public to report students seen in the community during the school day so they can be safely returned to school. In January 2009, Prince George's County Public Schools expanded its partnership with county police to encourage student attendance, particularly on State testing days.
- **Additional Pupil Personnel Workers:** During the 2007-2008 school year, PGCPSS hired 70 new pupil personnel workers to reduce truancy, increasing PPW-to-school ratio to one for every middle and high school, and one for every three elementary schools. PGCPSS reported that average daily attendance for the first quarter of the 2008-2009 school year was 91.2 percent compared to 79.6 percent in the first quarter of 2007-2008.

Baltimore County Public Schools:

- **Project Attend:** This program parallels Anne Arundel County's DJS-funded program, described above. According to DLS, in 2006-2007, 272 secondary students participated in Project Attend in Baltimore County and increased their average attendance rate from 75.0 to 85.4 percent.

Carroll County Public Schools:

- **Truancy Agreement with DJS and SAO:** Carroll County Public Schools has a written agreement with DJS and the State's Attorney's Office for informal interventions when school interventions for habitual truants are not successful. Truancy complaints can be filed with DJS or the SAO and school officials monitor the cases and report violations of court orders to the SAO. If the juvenile court finds that the child or parent violated the court order, it may require the child to perform community service and may fine or incarcerate the parent.

D. Other Local Initiatives to Reduce Truancy

Two additional truancy court/mediation programs operate in Baltimore City Public Schools through partnerships with the law schools at the Universities of Baltimore and the University of Maryland.

- **University of Baltimore School of Law Truancy Court Program:** In 2005, the University of Baltimore School of Law Center for Families, Children, and the Courts began operating a truancy court program in six Baltimore City elementary and middle schools. Truant students (and parents/guardians) meet in the “court” once a week for 10 weeks with a volunteer judge, local school officials, and a University law student and administrator, to determine and resolve truancy issues. According to the University of Baltimore, the program has resulted in a 50 to 75 percent increase in students’ attendance. As noted in Chapter V, this program has received a federal earmark to expand to two middle schools in each of four additional school systems, including MCPS.
- **University of Maryland School of Law Truancy Mediation Program:** The University of Maryland School of Law’s Center for Dispute Resolution initiated a Truancy Mediation Program in Baltimore City Schools. Under the program, students with attendance problems are identified early, when truancy first becomes a concern. During confidential mediations, parents and teachers meet with a mediator to discuss problems at home and in school in an effort to develop a plan for improving school attendance. According to DLS, one of the key benefits of the program is the ability to link parents with available services in the community.

Chapter VII: Research on Best Practices for Reducing Truancy

The research literature regarding best practices for reducing truancy is still emerging. The literature on truancy reduction is less developed than the literature on effective dropout prevention practices, which according to researchers, also is a work in progress.¹ Accordingly, the phrase “best practices” used in this section refers to best, model, and promising practices identified by researchers.

This chapter describes best practices for reducing truancy and describes how MCPS’ practices align with recommended best practices. The chapter is organized as follows:

- **Part A, Review of Best Practices Research**, synthesizes the research literature on recommended best practices for truancy and dropout reduction programs; and
- **Part B, Alignment between Best Practices and Montgomery County Practices**, compares truancy reduction prevention practices in Montgomery County to recommended best practices.

Two key observations emerge from OLO’s review:

- The research on truancy reduction and dropout prevention programs identifies five common components of effective programs – (1) interagency collaboration, (2) use of data to target programs, (3) school policies that promote attendance, (4) a comprehensive approach, and (5) use of performance measures and program evaluation.
- Montgomery County’s practices to reduce truancy across Montgomery County Public Schools, the Executive Branch, the State’s Attorney’s Office, the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, and the Housing Opportunities Commission partially align with recommended best practices for reducing truancy.

A. Review of Best Practices Research

This part describes best practices for reducing truancy in four sections:

- **Section 1, Recommended Frameworks for Truancy Reduction Programs**, describes recommended frameworks for reducing truancy based on two reviews of the best practices research;
- **Section 2, Lessons from Dropout Prevention Programs**, describes more specific school-based strategies and recommended practices to reduce truancy and/or dropouts based on prior evaluations of dropout prevention programs;
- **Section 3, Lessons from Truancy Reduction Evaluations**, describes more specific non-school-based strategies and recommended practices for community agencies, law-enforcement, and courts to reduce truancy based on evaluations of truancy reduction programs; and
- **Section 4, Summary of Best Practices**, describes five common components of effective truancy reduction programs found in both the dropout prevention and truancy reduction research.

¹ Mac Iver, D. and Mac Iver, M., 2009

1. Recommended Frameworks for Truancy Reduction Programs

OLO identified two best practices research sources that have developed recommended program frameworks for reducing truancy – the National Center for School Engagement and the Virginia Department of Education.

National Center for School Engagement. The National Center for School Engagement found that effective truancy reduction programs must simultaneously focus on three goals – promoting attendance, fostering student attachment to school, and emphasizing achievement.² NCSE’s research found that programs embodying the following components are most effective at reducing truancy:³

- Collaboration among community actors such as law enforcement, mental health workers, mentors, and social service providers, in addition to educators;
- Family involvement among all members of the family;
- A simultaneous focus on prevention and intervention;
- Use of meaningful incentives for good attendance and consequences for poor performance;
- A supportive context to help programs survive and thrive, rather than fighting against system infrastructure or acting in isolation; and
- Concrete and measurable goals for program performance and student performance, including good record keeping and on-going evaluation of progress toward goals.

Virginia Department of Education. The Virginia Department of Education’s *Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools* articulates a best practices framework for reducing truancy that include collaboration among schools, social service agencies, and the juvenile justice system. Table 7-1 below summarizes three recommended levels of intervention.

Table 7-1. Recommended Interventions for Improving School Attendance

Intervention Level	Strategies that Work
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a climate that encourages students’ connection to school • Establish firm and consistent attendance policies and sanctions for truancy and publicize them to students and parents • Establish a community norm for school attendance • Establish a system to notify parents when their child is truant • Establish truancy discipline policies that bring students back into schools rather than removing them from class • Include parents in plans to address truancy • Develop ways to better communicate with secondary students • Establish programs at school that meet the unique need of each student • Include student input in plans to address truancy

² See National Center for Student Engagement (NCSE) website at <http://www.truancyreduction.org/>. The NCSE based its conclusions on its review of studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, and its own research.

³ See *Truancy Prevention in Action*, National Center for Student Engagement, 2005

Table 7-1. Recommended Interventions for Improving School Attendance (continued)

Intervention Level	Strategies that Work
Early Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address emerging attendance problems with Attendance Review Boards that provide ongoing monitoring and follow-up • Connect kids with needed services • Provide alternative ways for students to reengage in school • Address barriers to school reentry for juvenile offenders • Use Truancy Assessment Centers
Legal Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use judicially driven interventions such as truancy court diversions, community truancy boards, and/or truancy mediation • Have youth courts address truancy

Source: *Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools*, VA Dept. of Education (Aug. 2005)

2. Lessons from Dropout Prevention Programs

OLO reviewed information from the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) and from researchers affiliated with Johns Hopkins University for this section.

What Works Clearinghouse. The WWC found that only four of 16 dropout prevention programs it assessed were successful at yielding positive effects in two of three domains: staying in school, progressing in school, or graduating.⁴ Researchers who have evaluated federal dropout prevention programs, conclude that "most programs did not reduce dropping out," primarily because the programs did not target the students most at-risk of dropping out with effective interventions.⁵ Among the dropout prevention programs identified as effective at encouraging students to stay in school or to progress in school, three prevention-based, school-focused models were identified:⁶

- **Career Academies:** These are high-school based school-within-school programs (i.e., small learning communities) that offer career-related curricula based on a career theme, academic coursework, and work experience, and include partnerships with local employers. According to California Partnership Academies, in 2004, this program cost school districts \$600 per pupil more than average per pupil expenditures.
- **Talent Development High Schools:** This is a model for restructuring large high schools with persistent attendance and discipline problems, poor student achievement, and high dropout rates using small learning communities (9th grade academies and upper-grade career academies) and emphasizing high academic standards and a college-preparatory curriculum. The reported cost for this model is \$350 per student per year more than average per pupil expenditure.
- **Accelerated Middle Schools:** This model provides additional instruction and support to students working below grade level; they can be structured as separate schools or as schools within a middle school. Classes are often linked thematically across multiple subjects and instruction is experiential. The additional cost of this model ranged from \$5,000 *more* per student in New Jersey to \$2,000 *more* per student in Michigan to \$2,000 *less* per student in Georgia.

⁴ See What Works Clearinghouse Overview of Dropout Prevention Programs, 2008

⁵ Dynarski and Gleason, 2002 - Cited by MacIver and MacIver, 2009

⁶ What Works Clearinghouse, *Effectiveness Ratings for Dropout Prevention: Staying in School*, accessed on December 17, 2009 <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/topic.aspx?tid=06>.

Two effective early intervention programs were also identified by the WWC:

- **Check and Connect:** Students enrolled in Check and Connect are assigned a monitor who regularly reviews their performance, intervenes in problems, and monitors services. The “check” component refers to the continual monitoring of student performance and progress indicators; the “connect” component refers to linking school personnel and community providers to students and families to address needs. Program developers report that implementing this program in secondary schools cost about \$1,400 per student per year in the 2001-02 school year.
- **ALAS (Spanish for “wings”):** This program assigns each student a counselor/mentor to monitor attendance, behavior, and academic achievement. The counselor/mentor provides parents and students feedback from teachers; coordinates interventions and resources for students, families, and teachers; and serves as a student advocate. Students are trained in problem-solving, self-control, and assertiveness skills; parents are trained in parent-child problem solving, how to participate in school activities, and how to contact teachers and parent administrators. In 2005, this intervention cost \$1,185 per participant per year.

Based on the WWC’s findings, the U.S. Department of Education published a practice guide for implementing effective dropout reduction strategies.⁷ Table 7-2 summarizes their recommendations.

Table 7-2. Summary of U.S. Department of Education’s Recommendations for Preventing Dropouts

Category	Specific Recommendation	Rationale
Diagnostic	Use data to realistically diagnose the number of drop outs and to identify students at high risk of dropping out.	Regularly review data on student absences, grade retention, and academic achievement with an emphasis on the transition to middle school from high school.
School-Wide Interventions	Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.	Personalized environments create a sense of belonging and fosters a climate where students and teachers know each other; provide academic, social, and behavioral support.
	Better engage students through rigorous and relevant instruction to equip them with skills needed to graduate.	Increase engagement by providing students with skills to finish high school and by showing students post-secondary options.
Targeted Interventions	Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.	Use adult advocates with appropriate backgrounds and low caseloads, and purposefully match them with students. Provide adequate training and support to advocates.
	Improve academic performance through academic support and enrichment.	Help students improve academic performance and reengage in school. Implement in conjunction with other recommendations.
	Implement programs to improve students’ classroom behavior and social skills.	Use attainable academic and behavioral goals and recognize students for accomplishment. Teach problem-solving and decision-making strategies. Partner with agencies to provide supports that address external social and behavioral factors.

Source: *Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide*, U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (2008)

⁷ Dynarski, M., et al, 2008

John Hopkins University. Mac Iver and Mac Iver have identified the “abc’s” of student disengagement as the most significant risk factors for students dropping out of school:⁸ *attendance problems* evidenced by high absenteeism; *behavior problems* evidenced by suspensions; and *course failures* evidenced by failing math or English/reading courses. They found that these three factors are interrelated and predictive of whether 9th graders stay on track to graduate. They also found that in 6th grade, these factors predict at least 50 percent of eventual dropouts.

Another team of Johns Hopkins researcher lead by Robert Balfanz tracked several cohorts of middle school students to determine which students fall off the path to graduation.⁹ They found that 6th graders who demonstrated the following had only a 10 to 20 percent chance of graduating on time:

- Failed math or English/reading, or
- Attended school less than 80 percent of the time, or
- Received an unsatisfactory grade in a core course.

Based on these findings, a team from Johns Hopkins has developed and implemented the Diplomas Now model in several middle schools across the country to reduce truancy and prevent dropouts. This model, described below in Table 7-3, uses a three-tiered intervention approach that targets the most intensive services to students with the greatest needs.

Table 7-3. Diplomas Now Program Framework

Type of Intervention	Focus of Intervention (ABCs)		
	Attendance	Behavior	Course Failure
School-wide (all students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response for each absence • A culture where attending every day matters • Positive attendance incentives • Teacher teams track data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach, model, and expect good behavior • Positive behavior incentives • Advisory • Teacher teams track data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research-based instructional programs • Classroom support for active and engaging pedagogies • Teacher teams track data
Targeted (15 – 20% of students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two or more unexpected absences per month bring daily check by an adult • Attendance team (teacher, counselor, parent) investigates and problem solves attendance issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two or more office referrals bring behavior team involvement • An adult checks a student’s behavior checklist in every class each day • Mentor assigned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra-help courses tightly linked to core curriculum – e.g., seeing upcoming lessons to fill knowledge gaps • Targeted, reduced class size for failing students with social-emotional issues
Intensive (5-10% of student)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained one-on-one attention and problem solving • Appropriate social service or community supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth behavioral assessment • Behavioral contract with family involvement • Appropriate social service or community supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one tutoring

Source: Mac Iver and Mac Iver, 2009

⁸ Mac Iver, M. and Mac Iver, D., 2009

⁹ Balfanz, R., 2009

Diplomas Now targets the most at-risk students through an early warning system and uses additional adults (via AmeriCorps and Communities in Schools) for student mentoring and case management services. An evaluation of a Philadelphia middle school pilot program found decreases in the number of off-track students for attendance (down 52%), behavior (down 45%), and course performance (down 83%) over the past school year.¹⁰ The program's estimated per-school cost is \$400,000 to \$500,000 annually.

3. Lessons from Truancy Reduction Evaluations

OLO reviewed information compiled by the National Center for Student Engagement (NCSE) and the Maryland Department of Legislative Services for this section. OLO's review of NCSE sources include evaluations of truancy reduction programs funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

Truancy Demonstrations. Table 7-4 summarizes six truancy reduction projects funded by OJJDP.¹¹

Table 7-4. Description of OJJDP Truancy Reduction Demonstration Projects

Target Population	Key Program Features	Program Type
Truancy Reduction Program – Rodeo, CA		
Grades K-5 and 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance worker explains attendance laws to parents Case management of hardest cases Student Attendance Review Boards On-site sheriffs assigned to each pilot school 	School-based
State's Attorney Office – Jacksonville, FL		
30 schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings w/ parents, youth, school social workers, hearing officers Family referrals to community based services Truancy reduction contracts Case management of hardest cases 	Pre-court diversion
Suffolk County Probation Department – Yaphawk, NY		
Middle school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School-wide interventions with attendance rewards and sanctions Truancy homerooms for chronically absent students Case management of hardest cases 	Probation department-initiated
Gulfton Truancy Reduction Project – Houston, TX		
High-risk 9 th grade students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police visits to homes of truant students (i.e., knock and talk) Case management of hardest cases 	Joint police/public school
King County Superior Court – Seattle, WA		
High-risk K-12 students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance workshops Case management Community truancy boards Contracted services with community agencies 	Juvenile court-initiated
SafeStreets Campaign – Tacoma, WA		
High-risk middle school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referrals to interagency team and community service providers Case management Weekly meetings and progress monitoring 	School-based

Source: National Center for Student Engagement

¹⁰ Gewertz, C., 2009

¹¹ *Truancy Reduction Demonstration Projects, 1999 to Present*; National Center for Student Engagement, 2006

The National Center for Student Engagement (NCSE) found that many of these programs helped improve student attendance. The programs that led to the most improvement in school attendance used intensive case management, were family focused, and used both sanctions for continued truancy and reward for improved attendance. Students reported that teacher support was essential to their return to classes, as opposed to teacher sarcasm, which not surprisingly, alienated students.

The least effective programs focused exclusively on sanctions. For example, a study of a police-run truancy sweep program – where truants were taken to a truancy center and required to quietly sit still with heads on desks for up to six hours before being released to parents – showed little positive effect on subsequent school attendance or delinquency.¹² A related NCSE evaluation of the use of juvenile detention to deter truancy in Colorado found no evidence of improved attendance or academic performance among the 30 juvenile participants in the study.¹³

Colorado Programs. A NCSE study evaluated three intensive intervention programs in Colorado: a court-based approach, a wrap-around services/community-based provider management model for middle school students, and a school-based case management approach. NCSE found that each approach was effective and demonstrated “widespread positive effects” because each made service referrals for serious family problems.¹⁴

NCSE also found that the benefits of each program far exceeded their costs compared to an estimated \$229,000 lifetime cost of dropping out of school.¹⁵ The study concluded that “the best model includes a court system that works in close cooperation and conjunction with social workers and school districts to provide a coherent and consistent approach to truancy in which children do not slip through the cracks.”¹⁶

Model Truancy Prevention Programs. NCSE has also identified several additional programs sponsored by courts, law enforcement, social service and other agencies that have been effective at reducing truancy. Table 7-5 summarizes these model programs.

Table 7-5. Summary of Model Truancy Prevention Programs Identified by NCSE

Program Sponsor(s)	Key Program Features	Program Outcomes
Abolish Chronic Truancy - Los Angeles, CA (Targets: K-6 students)		
District Attorney’s Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter to parents • Parent and child meetings with deputy district attorney, service providers, school personnel • School Attendance Review Team (SART) • School Attendance Review Board (SARB) • Case filed against the parent and /or child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter: 83% improved attendance • SART improvement: 11-15% • SARB referrals: 2% • Court filings: less than 1%

¹² Bazemore et.al., 2004 – Cited by National Center for Student Engagement, 2007

¹³ National Center for Student Engagement, 2003

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Table 7-5. Summary of Model Truancy Prevention Programs Identified by NCSE (continued)

Program Sponsor(s)	Key Program Features	Program Outcomes
Communities in Schools (Targets: K-12 students at-risk)		
National, non-profit organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination of existing community resources and services to school sites • Focus on dropout prevention and mitigating related problems (e.g., teen violence, gang involvement) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance: 68% of students improved • Grades: 49% of students improved
Truancy Intervention Project – Fulton County, GA (Targets: K-12 students)		
Court system, schools, and community providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court resources and procedures to expedite cases • Pro bono attorney representation • Needs based client services • Use of volunteers as mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12% decrease in the rate of truancy for adjudicated children
Hennepin County Hope for Kids Project – Minneapolis, MN (Target: children at-risk for truancy and educational neglect)		
Collaborative of agencies (Attorney's Office, Children and Family Services)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-disciplinary screening teams • Case management • Referrals to diversion or truancy court • Curfew-Truancy center • School Attendance Review Boards • Juvenile court lecture program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65% of cases referred to diversion did not need court intervention • 78% of cases attending lecture were not re-referred for truancy
Kern County Truancy Reduction Program – Bakersfield, CA (Target: truant students)		
Probation office and regional school center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of integrated services to truants/families • Unannounced home visits • Weekly school site contact • Counseling and referrals • Cross-age mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over a two-year period, no unexcused absences for 25-40% of students and less than four unexcused absences for 40-60% of students.
Project Redirect – Colorado Springs, CO (Target: multi-agency involved youth)		
Collaborative of eight community agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency partnerships to reduce services duplication • Case management • Mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10-15% increased attendance and decreased substance abuse and police contact
Ramsey County Truancy Intervention Program – St. Paul, MN (Target: Truant students ages 12-16)		
District Attorney's Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student/parents meet with SAO and school staff • Referral to School Attendance Review Team (SART) • Truancy petition files 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 73% decrease in truancy petitions • Meeting: 50% improved attendance • SART: 50% improved attendance
Truancy Habits Reduced, Increasing Valuable Education – Oklahoma City, OK (Target: Truant youth)		
Law enforcement, education, and social services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police take suspected truant to a community-operated detention center • Student assessed and released to parent • Referrals to social services, as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local law enforcement report a 30% reduction in daytime crime

Source: National Center for Student Engagement

Recommended Joint Agency Efforts. Based on its assessment that “correcting truancy requires multiple actors,”¹⁷ NCSE has identified joint efforts that agencies, law enforcement, and courts can undertake to address truancy, summarized in Table 7-6.

Table 7-6. Recommended Joint Efforts to Improve School Attendance

State Educational Agency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build and maintain a healthy and productive school attendance task force. • Share state level information among schools, courts, probation, social services, mental health, faith, business, and law enforcement on school attendance laws, system flow among agencies, services, supports, and gaps. • Draft a multi-agency memorandum of understanding to commit to improving school attendance. • Develop public education and awareness campaigns targeting parents/guardians, youth, and the community about state law, non-attendance consequences, and the importance of staying in school. • Form a group to lobby legislators for support in passing statutes to implement goals. • Educate community members about lobbying legislators to support prevention programs.
Local Law Enforcement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide community outreach on importance of school attendance and interest in youth out of school. • Routinely visit schools to inform personnel and students about attendance laws and consequences. • Establish procedures and protocols for community reporting of non-attendance and for escorting students to schools or community centers. • Become integrally involved in community-level programs that improve school attendance.
Juvenile Court
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider a variety of sanctions (community service, denied driving privileges, required school attendance of parents/guardians) before detaining non-attending youth. • Judges becoming aware of existing community programs to engage youth in school. • Represent the Court in any state or local efforts to reengage youth in school.
Department of Juvenile Justice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop standard protocols for intake and processing of cases for violations of attendance laws. • Use agency information sharing agreements to reduce service duplication for multi-issue youth/families. • Use universities for data collection assistance and for interns to provide pilot program services.

Source: *Pieces of the Jigsaw: A Literature Review*, National Center on Student Engagement (January 2007)

Maryland Department of Legislative Services. The Maryland General Assembly’s Department of Legislative Services (DLS) identified two additional effective programs summarized below.¹⁸

- **Delaware’s truancy court program:** Since 1998, the Delaware truancy court has used a comprehensive truancy-reducing approach that includes teachers, prosecutors, judges, court personnel, social workers, and health providers. Each partner helps families solve truancy and other problems during the six to nine months that a family typically participates in the program. Providers of wrap-around family services are present in the court room to begin the process immediately upon referral and this presence is regarded as a significant factor in engaging families in needed services. Delaware’s program works extensively with teachers who are responsible for filing charges with the court and for ongoing monitoring of attendance and academic performance for each case.

¹⁷ National Center for Student Engagement, 2005

¹⁸ Department of Legislative Services, *Approaches to Solving the Problem of Truancy*, 2008

- **Washington’s truancy petition process:** In 1995, Washington enacted the Becca Bill that, in part, requires school districts to file a truancy petition in juvenile court if a student has seven unexcused absences in a month or ten in an academic year. Consequently, juvenile courts have developed programs such as school-based courts sessions for truancy petitions, truancy classes and attendance workshops, and deferred truancy prevention programs that keep students out of court if they participate in truancy intervention programs. Most studies have found positive results, including stronger school attendance monitoring and enforcement policies, greater likelihood that students stay in school, and increased high school enrollment rates. However, “achieving these positive results has placed heavy burden on both the courts and the schools. The number of truancy petitions grew from 91 in 1994 to over 10,000 in 1996.”¹⁹

4. Summary of Research-Based Best Practices

Evaluations of truancy and dropout prevention programs identify a number of best practices for reducing truancy. Five common components of effective truancy reduction programs identified in both sets of research are summarized below.

- **Interagency collaboration** – effective truancy reduction programs rely on collaboration among schools, families, and community service agencies – including law enforcement, social services agencies, and mental health organizations – to address the personal, academic, school climate, and family-related factors that contribute to truant behavior.
- **Use of data to target programs** – effective truancy reduction programs regularly review data on student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement to identify students at high risk for truancy, to ensure that effective interventions are targeted to students most at risk.
- **School policies that promote attendance** – schools with effective truancy reduction programs ensure that their policies promote student attendance and attachment by:
 - a. Implementing effective attendance policies and applying them consistently,
 - b. Eliminating “push-out policies” such as suspensions for truancy and automatic class failure for poor student attendance,
 - c. Notifying parents when absences occur,
 - d. Ensuring that teachers respect and support all students, and
 - e. Establishing welcoming and safe school environments.
- **A comprehensive approach** – effective truancy reduction programs focus simultaneously on prevention and intervention by implementing a three-tiered approach that offers: (a) school-wide efforts to prevent truancy, (b) targeted initiatives to improve attendance among chronically absent students, and (c) intensive interventions to improve the attendance of habitual truants. Effective interventions for truants and students at highest risk for truancy include a focus on addressing the root causes of truancy, case management, and the use of a second team of adults to mentor and deliver intensive services to students and families.
- **Program evaluation** – effective truancy reduction programs establish concrete and measurable goals for program and student performance and monitor these measures to identify opportunities for program improvement and to ensure that truancy programs work as intended.

¹⁹ *Truancy Case Processing Practices*, Washington State Center for Court Research, 2004 – Cited by Cited by Department of Legislative Services, 2008

B. Alignment between Best Practices and Montgomery County Practices

This part describes how Montgomery County's current practices to reduce truancy align with the five components of effective truancy programs identified in the best practices research literature.

(1) Interagency collaboration: OLO assessment - Partially Aligned

Montgomery County relies on Montgomery County Public Schools to address most cases of truancy rather than interagency collaboration. Despite the interagency activities described in Chapter V and the work of the Interagency Truancy Review Board, interagency collaboration to reduce truancy is not the norm in the County. When interagency collaboration occurs, it often emerges informally among interagency staff housed in schools, such as between MCPS teachers and Educational Facilities Officers (MCPD staff) and/or school health nurses (DHHS staff). For example:

- A truant student may have a physical or mental health evaluation at a Linkages to Learning site,
- An EFO may collaborate with MCPS or school health staff to counsel a truant student, or
- A pupil personnel worker may link a truant student to an outside agency's/organization's services.

Aside from the ITRB, no formal, coordinated programs to address truancy across agencies exist in Montgomery County. The Department of Juvenile Services does not file CINS petitions for truancy in the County; MCPD does not pick up truant students or offer diversion programs to reduce truancy; DHHS' programs only tangentially address truancy.

MCPS bears the sole responsibility for addressing truancy in 95 percent of all cases. Less than five percent of cases are heard by the Interagency Truancy Review Board and only a small fraction of these cases are referred to the State's Attorney's Office for criminal prosecution.

(2) Use of data to target programs: OLO assessment - Partially Aligned

At the start of this school year (2009-2010), MCPS began identifying students at risk for habitual truancy by identifying students with unexcused absence rates between 10 and 19 percent. The Office of School Performance shares this information monthly with school principals and pupil personnel workers.

MCPS' use of only student attendance data to identify at-risk students, however, does not follow the model recommended by researchers. The recommended model for identifying students most at risk for truancy uses a combination data on student absences, attachment, and academic achievement.

(3) School policies that promote attendance: OLO assessment - Partially Aligned

MCPS' supportive practices to promote school attendance include the school system's efforts to:

- Foster awareness of its attendance policies;
- Contact parents after each absence;
- Increase parental involvement;
- Implement positive behaviors supports; and
- Implement programs and activities that enhance student engagement, such as after-school programs and extra-curricular activities.

However, some of the sanctions for truancy implemented by MCPS – including its loss-of-credit and academic ineligibility policies – may work at cross purposes to school efforts to re-engage students and improve their attendance. Similarly, limitations on chronically absent students’ ability to enroll in “hands-on” career technology programs or in high-interest alternative programs that might re-engage students in school may increase their likelihood of dropping out of school.

(4) Comprehensive approach: OLO assessment - Partially Aligned

MCPS uses a three-tiered approach to reducing truancy that aligns with the public health model for truancy prevention and intervention advocated by researchers. However, the intensity of MCPS’ services in the second and third tiers lags behind researchers’ expectations:

- MCPS delivers its first tier of programming to all students. It focuses on prevention by communicating the school systems’ attendance policies to everyone, by tracking attendance, and fostering a positive school climate with a strong academic program. MCPS’ first tier of services aligns with best practices recommended by researchers.
- MCPS’ second tier targets students with unexcused absence rates of 10–19 percent. Schools’ Collaborative Problem Solving teams identify, deliver, and monitor additional services. Models advocated by truancy experts, however, suggest the use of more intensive services in tier 2, such as the daily checks with an adult mentor to increase student attendance.
- MCPS’ third tier targets students with unexcused absence rates of 20 percent or more through each campus’ Educational Management Team (EMT). Research recommends that a second team of adults dedicated to increasing student attendance should deliver tier 3 services to achieve desired outcomes. Within MCPS, each member of the EMT, including the PPW, has responsibilities over and above increasing attendance among habitually truant students that may limit the overall effectiveness of this problem solving team at providing services.

(5) Program evaluation: OLO assessment - Not Aligned

The best practices research indicates that effective truancy programs establish concrete and measurable goals for program and student performance. This research also recommends that school systems monitor performance measures to identify opportunities for program improvement and to ensure that truancy programs work as intended.

MCPS has not evaluated the overall effectiveness of its truancy prevention programs. Nor has MCPS identified measures for program performance except for the Interagency Truancy Review Board that serves less than five percent of all habitually truant students. Further, the ITRB performance measure does not include a specific goal beyond increasing attendance following an ITRB hearing. While 74 percent of students improved their attendance in the semester following their hearing, nearly half of all students continued to miss 20 percent or more days of school.

MCPS’ strategic plan calls for each school to meet or exceed local and state standards for attendance (i.e., a 94 percent attendance rate in 2009). Monitoring progress on this standard, however, is insufficient for tracking truancy or evaluating the effectiveness of truancy programs. Recently, MCPS began tracking specific interventions delivered to habitually truant students. In the future, this data could help MCPS evaluate the effectiveness of its truancy reduction efforts.

Chapter VIII: Project Findings

Preventing and reducing student truancy is a challenge in communities across the country, including Montgomery County. The research has found that students who are truant are more likely to drop out of school; and truancy is linked to higher rates of substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and other risky behaviors. Based on an examination of literature describing evaluations of truancy reduction programs, the research also identifies a number of “best practices” for preventing and reducing truancy.

This report by the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) responds to the Council’s request to examine truancy within Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), interagency efforts in the County to address habitual truancy, and best practices for curbing truancy. The findings outlined in this chapter are based on OLO’s interviews with agency staff, school site visits, document reviews, analysis of data, and a review of the relevant research literature.¹

This chapter describes OLO’s project findings in three areas:

- **Part A, Truancy Laws and Regulations**, (pages 79-80), describes state laws and regulations that shape local definitions of habitual truancy and establish sanctions for truancy.
- **Part B, Scope of Truancy in Montgomery County**, (pages 80-82), describes the number of truant students in Montgomery County and their characteristics based on available data.
- **Part C, Alignment between Best Practices and Local Practices**, (pages 83-91), describes the degree to which Montgomery County’s practices for addressing truancy mirror the “best practices” identified by evidenced-based research. The local agencies included are listed below:
 - Montgomery County Public Schools
 - Montgomery County Police Department
 - Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services
 - Montgomery County State’s Attorney’s Office
 - Maryland Department of Juvenile Services
 - The Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County

In sum, the major findings from OLO’s review of data and information are:

- **State law defines habitual truancy and the sanctions for truancy in the County.** State regulation defines habitual truancy as an unexcused absence rate of 20 percent or more within a school year, semester, or marking period. State law allows the prosecution of parents, but not students, for truancy.
- **The magnitude of habitual truancy in the County is relatively low.** In 2009, less than one percent of all MCPS students were truant habitually. However, the high threshold for defining habitual truancy combined with the exclusion of some dropouts and mobile students from data counts may underestimate the magnitude of truancy in MCPS.

¹ See References.

- **Local truancy prevention and intervention practices reflect some but not all of the best practices identified by the evidenced-based research.** Of note, MCPS’ focus on improving school climates and practice of notifying parents of student absences align with identified best practices, while the limited collaboration across County agencies and the limited evaluations of existing truancy reduction programs do not.

Part A. Truancy Laws and Regulations

Finding #1: MCPS uses the state’s definition of habitual truancy, having decided not to exercise the option (allowed by regulation) to define habitual truancy more stringently.

Under Maryland regulation, a student who is absent from school for an unexcused reason for a school day or portion of a day is considered a “truant.” A student is referred to as a “habitual truant” when the student is “unlawfully” absent from school for 20 percent or more of the school days (or portions of days) in any marking period, semester, or year – 18 or more days in one semester or 36 or more days in one school year. A state regulation lists the situations when a child’s absence from school is excused; any reason except those listed in the regulation is presumed to be unexcused or “unlawful”.

Table 8-1 lists (in order of magnitude) the threshold for unexcused absences used to define habitual truancy in 16 states surveyed by the Education Commission of the States in 2005. Compared to Maryland, 15 of these states use a lower threshold of unexcused absences to define habitual truancy.

Table 8-1. Examples of State Definitions of Habitual Truancy, 2005

State	Number of Unexcused Absences	Percent of Time Out of School*
Louisiana	5 days/month	23%
Maryland	18 days/semester	20%
Florida	15 days/semester	17%
Connecticut	20 days/year	11%
Texas	10 days/semester or 3 days/month	11%
Illinois	18 days/year	10%
New Mexico	10 days/year	6%
Maine	10 days/year or 7 consecutive days	6%
Colorado	10 days/year or 4 days/month	6%
Wisconsin	5 days/semester	6%
California	9 days/year	5%
Utah	8 days/year	4%
Minnesota	7 days/year	4%
Kentucky	6 days/year	3%
Arizona	5 days/year	3%
Wyoming	5 days/year	3%
Nevada	3 days/year	2%

Note: * Based on a 90-day semester and a 180-day school year.

Source: COMAR; Education Commission of the States, State Policy Database, Truancy and Habitual Truancy, Examples of State Definitions, April 2005

MCPS uses the state's definition of habitual truancy as its definition even though Maryland regulations allow each local school system to define habitual truancy "in a more but not less stringent manner" than the state. Baltimore City, for example, defines habitual truancy as an unexcused absence rate of 15 percent or higher (equivalent to 14 days per semester and 27 days per year).

Finding #2: The Maryland State Department of Education's method for counting habitually truant students excludes students enrolled for fewer than 91 days in the same school. Official counts in every Maryland school system, including MCPS, would be higher if these students were included.

State law defines a habitually truant student as a student who is unlawfully absent for 20 percent or more of the time. In practice, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) only collects data from local school systems on habitually truant students for students who were unlawfully absent 20 percent or more of the time *and* who attended the same school for 91 days (i.e., more than half of the 180-day school year).

As a consequence, MSDE's count of habitually truant students in every jurisdiction, including MCPS, excludes students who may have changed schools during the year, even if those students meet the attendance threshold for habitual truancy. As a result of this methodology, some of the students most likely to demonstrate habitual truancy – students who drop out over the summer or at the end of the first semester, and highly mobile students who only attend the same school for a full semester or less – are excluded from official counts of habitual truants.

Finding #3: State laws establishing sanctions for truancy are used infrequently in Montgomery County.

Under Maryland law, students cannot be criminally prosecuted for truancy. Only students' parents, guardians, or other adults who encourage student truancy can be criminally prosecuted. Since 2005, the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office has prosecuted 55 parents and guardians for student truancy in the County. Of the estimated 5,000 MCPS students that have been habitually truant since 2005, this represents about one percent of all cases of habitual truancy during this time frame.

State law enables the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) to file petitions in juvenile court that declare truant students to be Children in Need of Supervision (CINS) based on their habitual truancy. However, DJS has not filed any formal CINS cases in Montgomery County in recent years based on habitual truancy. According to DJS staff, this results from the agency's perspective that MCPS is better suited than DJS to address habitual truancy; and because DJS devotes its resources to serving youth who, in its judgment, have higher needs.

Part B. Scope of Truancy in Montgomery County

Finding #4: Less than one percent of MCPS students were habitually truant in 2009. The number of habitually truant students in MCPS has declined by five percent since 2005.

Based on MCPS' official counts of habitually truant students, less than one percent of all MCPS students were habitually truant in 2009. Further, from 2006 to 2009, the habitual truancy rate of MCPS students decreased by five percent, from 0.75 percent to 0.71 percent of all students.

As noted in Table 8-2 below, high school students made up 64 percent of all habitual truants in 2009. Overall, 1.5 percent of all high school students were habitually truant in 2009. Table 8-3 lists the 2009 truancy rates for each of MCPS 25 high schools, from highest to lowest.

Table 8-2. MCPS' Habitually Students by School Level, 2009

	Number of Students	Distribution
All Schools	984	100%
High Schools	627	64%
Middle Schools	160	16%
Elementary Schools	166	17%
Special Schools	31	3%

Source: MSDE DPRR

Table 8-3. Number and Percent of Habitually Truant High School Students 2009

School	Number	Percent
All MCPS Schools	984	0.71
Wheaton	51	3.86
Northwood	51	3.85
Montgomery Blair	87	3.24
Gaithersburg	62	3.09
Clarksburg	40	2.42
Einstein	29	1.84
Richard Montgomery	35	1.79
Magruder	35	1.78
Seneca Valley	23	1.71
Watkins Mill	27	1.70
Springbrook	30	1.59
Walt Whitman	28	1.52
Paint Branch	26	1.44
Quince Orchard	20	1.16
Kennedy	18	1.16
Northwest	20	0.99
Bethesda-Chevy Chase	17	0.96
Rockville	5	0.40
Sherwood	8	0.38
Blake	6	0.33
Walter Johnson	5	0.25
Thomas Wootton	6	0.24
Poolesville	1	0.10
Winston Churchill	2	0.09
Damascus	1	0.07

Sources: MSDE and MCPS DPRR

Finding #5: Demographic data on chronic absenteeism and five other correlates of truancy suggest that habitual truants are disproportionately black, Latino, male, enrolled in special education, receive free and reduced priced meals, and are English language learners.

MCPS does not currently collect demographic data on students who are habitually truant. Knowing more about the characteristics of habitual truants could assist the school system and other County agencies to address the specific factors that contribute to truancy locally. As an alternative way to identify the characteristics of habitually truant students, OLO looked to demographic data on identifiable measures that either contribute to or result from truancy (“correlate measures”):

- Chronic absenteeism (i.e., absent 20 or more days during the school year);
- Out of school suspensions;
- Loss of credit in the first semester of 9th grade;
- Academic ineligibility to participate in extracurricular activities in high school;
- Grade retention in high school (i.e., too few credits earned to advance to the next grade); and
- Dropping out of high school.

Table 8-4 summarizes the most recent correlate data available on MCPS students overall and by race and ethnicity. Black and Latino students were often two to three times as likely as their white and Asian peers to demonstrate these correlates. For example, 39-41 percent of black and Latino freshmen lost credit their first semester in 2008 compared to 9 percent of Asian and white freshmen. These consistent patterns in correlates of truancy suggest higher rates of truancy among black and Latino students.

Table 8-4. Percent of MCPS Students Exhibiting Truancy Correlates, by Race and Ethnicity

	Absent 20 or More Days, 2009*	Out-of- School Suspensions 2008	Grade 9 Loss of Credit 2008**	Academic Ineligibility 2008***	Grade 9-12 Retention 2009	Grade 9-12 Dropouts 2009
All Students	6.9	4.0	23.2	21.1	5.3	2.7
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups						
Asian	3.1	1.3	9.0	10.7	2.3	1.0
Black	8.1	8.6	38.5	34.7	8.0	3.9
Latino	10.4	5.1	40.7	36.2	9.5	5.2
White	5.7	2.0	8.9	10.6	2.6	1.3

Notes: * Grades 1-12, ** End of 1st semester; *** End of school year

Sources: Maryland Report Card, MCPS unpublished data, October 26, 2009 Board of Education Packet; MSDE-DAA, Summary of Attendance, 2006-2008; MCPS Annual Suspension Reports

Data on several of these correlate measures also suggest higher rates of truancy among male students and students eligible for special education, ESOL, and FARMS. For example, compared to 7 percent of all students, 11-13 percent of low-income students and students with disabilities were chronically absent in 2009. Similarly, 5-6 percent of students with disabilities, low-income students, and ESOL students dropped out of high school in 2009 compared to 3 percent of all students. Students with disabilities and low income students also had higher rates of out-of-school suspensions, at 7-9 percent, compared to 4 percent of all students in 2008.

Part C. Alignment between Best Practices and Local Practices

This final set of findings describes research-based “best practices” for effective truancy programs and how local practices across County agencies are similar or different from these best practices. More specifically:

- **Finding #6** summarizes five **best practices** for effective truancy programs identified by the evidenced-based research: interagency collaboration; use of data to target programs; school policies that promote attendance; a comprehensive approach; and program evaluation;
- **Findings #7 through #13** describe the extent of **interagency collaboration** in the County to reduce truancy and individual agency efforts that explicitly focus on truant students; and
- **Findings #14 through #17** compare current practices in Montgomery County Public Schools to the recommended best practices for **using data, school policies, comprehensive approaches, and program evaluations** to reduce truancy.

BEST PRACTICES

Finding #6: Components of effective truancy programs include: interagency collaboration; the use of data to target programs; school policies that promote attendance; a comprehensive program approach; and program evaluation efforts.

The evidenced-based research on truancy and dropout prevention programs identify a number of best practices for reducing truancy. The research identifies the following program components as most effective at improving student attendance:

1. **Interagency collaboration** – effective truancy programs rely on collaboration among family, schools, and other public agencies (including law enforcement and social services agencies) to address the personal, academic, school climate, and family-related factors that contribute to truant behavior.
2. **Use of data to target programs** – effective truancy programs regularly review data on student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement to identify students at high risk for truancy, and to ensure that effective interventions are targeted to students most at risk.
3. **School policies that promote attendance** – schools with effective truancy programs ensure that their policies promote student attendance and engagement² by: (a) implementing effective attendance policies; (b) eliminating “push-out policies” such as suspensions for truancy and automatic class failure for poor student attendance; (c) notifying parents when absences occur; (d) ensuring that teachers respect and support all students; and (e) establishing welcoming and safe school environments.

² “Engagement” refers to the connectedness or attachment that students feel toward school.

4. **A comprehensive approach** – effective truancy programs focus simultaneously on prevention and intervention by implementing a three-tiered approach that offers: (a) school-wide efforts to prevent truancy; (b) targeted initiatives to improve attendance among at-risk students; and (c) intensive interventions to improve the attendance of habitual truants. Effective interventions for truants and students at highest risk for truancy include a focus on addressing the root causes of truancy, case management, and the use of a dedicated team of adults to mentor and deliver intensive services to students and families.
5. **Program evaluation** – effective truancy programs establish concrete and measurable goals for program and student performance. Effective programs also monitor these measures to identify opportunities for program improvement and to ensure that truancy programs work as intended.

INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

Finding #7: MCPS acts as the lead agency in Montgomery County in preventing and reducing truancy. The Interagency Truancy Review Board is the only formal interagency activity explicitly designed to address truancy.

The research literature on truancy best practices identifies interagency collaboration as a critical component of effective programs for reducing truancy. Collaboration among schools, law enforcement, and social services is identified as essential for addressing the myriad of factors that contribute to truancy. OLO's interviews with staff across Montgomery County agencies indicate that:

- MCPS acts as the lead agency in preventing and reducing truancy in Montgomery County;
- Informal collaboration between and among MCPS and other agencies often occurs on an *ad hoc* basis in local schools to facilitate the delivery of specific services to individual students;
- Besides the Interagency Truancy Review Board, there is little formal interagency collaboration to curb truancy through shared data, program design, and/or service delivery.

OLO's interviews identified many examples of the informal collaboration that occurs between MCPS school-based staff and other agency staff. MCPS counselors and pupil personnel workers frequently work with County-funded personnel and/or programs co-located in schools (e.g., school nurses, Educational Facilities Officers, Linkages to Learning) to address the root causes of students' truancy. When warranted, some County Government personnel, such as school nurses, participate in MCPS' problem solving processes to help individual students. These school-based problem solving teams often refer truant students and their families to County-funded services.

The single formal interagency truancy intervention program in the County is the Interagency Truancy Review Board (described in the next finding), which only targets about four percent of all habitual truancy cases in the County. The other 96 percent of habitually truant cases are handled by MCPS alone.

Finding #8: The Interagency Truancy Review Board is currently the only formal interagency truancy intervention program. The ITRB focuses on students with the most severe truancy problems (about 4% of all habitual truancy cases).

The Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB) was established to improve the attendance of habitually truant students who have not responded to prior school-based services. Members of the ITRB work together to identify, deliver, and document interventions before MCPS refers cases to the State's Attorney's Office for criminal prosecution. MCPS manages referrals to the ITRB and uses this forum as a "last resort" to increase the attendance of habitually truants. Table 8-5 lists the agency representatives on the ITRB.

Table 8-5. List of Agencies with Representatives on the ITRB, 2010

Agency and Number of Representatives	Representative's Department or Office
Montgomery County Public Schools (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Student Services (Chair) • Residency and International Admissions Office • Court Liaison
Department of Health and Human Services (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Welfare Services • School Health Services • Child & Adolescent Outpatient Mental Health Services
Montgomery County Police Department (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Services Division
State's Attorney's Office (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Prosecution Unit
Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Montgomery County/Rockville Regional Office
Housing Opportunities Commission (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resident Services

Source: MCPS Department of Student Services

Members of the ITRB usually meet monthly during the school year to conduct hearings with individual students and their families. ITRB hearings also include the student's school administrator, their Pupil Personnel Worker, and if applicable, outside agency staff. As follow-up to these hearings, the ITRB drafts an "Attendance Contract" with requirements for student compliance. The ITRB also provides referrals for needed services, such as mental health evaluations or substance abuse referrals.

Students with improved attendance do not have subsequent hearings. If a student's attendance does not improve after two or more hearings, the ITRB typically refers the case to the State's Attorney's Office (SAO) for criminal prosecution of the student's parents or guardians. If a student fails to attend ITRB hearings on multiple occasions, then the Board will also refer the case to the SAO.

Last year, MCPS referred 43 (4.3%) of 984 habitually truant students to the ITRB. Generally, students' attendance improved following their ITRB hearing: attendance rates increased on average from 63-67 percent to 76-78 percent in the semester following their hearing with three-quarters of all students improving their attendance. However, many students continued to be chronically absent or habitually truant following their ITRB hearing: nearly half of students continued to miss 20 percent or more days of schools following their hearing.

Finding #9: In addition to its ongoing work with MCPS to identify truancy cases for prosecution, the State’s Attorney’s Office is partnering with MCPS to begin a Truancy Court Program in two middle schools.

The Montgomery County State’s Attorney’s Office (SAO) investigates and prosecutes individuals accused of breaking State and local laws, including the prosecution of parents or guardians of habitually truant students. A representative from the SAO has served on the Interagency Truancy Review Board since its inception.

SAO staff report that since 2005, the SAO has filed charges against parents and/or guardians in District Court on 55 occasions representing about one percent of all cases of habitual truancy since then. The SAO can only file charges against parents of students who are under 16 years old and typically, the SAO only files charges in truancy cases after a family has gone through the ITRB process without any improvement of the student’s attendance. Truancy cases typically are resolved with a guilty plea, a trial, or a “stet,” where a trial is postponed indefinitely, but where the prosecutor may reopen the case at any time.

Recently, the SAO entered into a partnership with MCPS and the University of Baltimore School of Law’s Center for Family, Children and the Courts to establish a Truancy Court Program in Key Middle School in Silver Spring and Neelsville Middle School in Germantown. Scheduled to begin in February 2010, the program will serve 10 to 15 students at a time in ten-week sessions during the school year. The program is designed to target students with absence rates of 3-10 percent, so it will target students before they would otherwise be identified by MCPS for truancy.

Students in the program will meet for about ten minutes per week with a judge, a mentor employed by the program, and law school staff and students. In addition, students (and parents) will participate in a mentoring program with character-building classes and individual mentoring. Students will graduate from the program at the end of a session if they decrease their unexcused absences by 75 percent. If students do not graduate, they can return to the program for another ten-week session.

Finding #10: The Montgomery County Police Department works with MCPS to enhance school safety but does not offer diversion programs focused on truancy. Under Maryland law, police officers cannot legally pick up students based only on truancy.

Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) officers interact with truant students primarily through the department’s Educational Facilities Officers (EFO) Program – which assigns an EFO to work at all 25 MCPS high schools and two middle schools. In addition, a representative from the Family Crimes Division serves on the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

The EFOs’ primary responsibility is to ensure school safety. EFOs also participate in schools in a variety of ways – such as coordinating joint MCPD/MCPS activities and programs and participating in school-based safety committees. MCPD, however, does not have any programs explicitly designed to prevent or reduce truancy.

MCPD staff report that officers’ are limited in their ability to address truancy because officers have no authority in either state or local law to detain or transport truant students (back to school or elsewhere). State law allowing officers to take children into custody is limited to four narrow circumstances, none of which include truancy.

Finding #11: The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services does not file Children in Need of Services petitions for habitual truancy in Montgomery County.

The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) cares for and treats youth who break the law or who are a danger to themselves or others. DJS coordinates and operates prevention and early-intervention programs, non-residential community-based programs, and residential programs. A DJS representative also serves on the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

While DJS offers access to programs for youth that include outpatient substance abuse programs, youth mentoring, and gang outreach activities, the Department does not have any programs that specifically target truant youth. Youth who receive informal services from DJS sign a contract that requires school attendance. Youth that DJS sends to court often receive probation, with school attendance as one of the conditions of probation.

As noted in Finding #3, a habitually truant student can be classified by a state Circuit Court (sitting as a Juvenile Court) as a “Child in Need of Supervision” if DJS files a petition with the court. The court may impose a variety of consequences on a student designed as a Child in Need of Supervision, including probation, transferring custody or guardianship of the student, placing the student in DJS’ custody, and/or adopting a plan for the student to receive treatment services.

Montgomery County’s DJS, however, does not file formal CINS petitions in Juvenile Court for truancy-related cases for two reasons: (1) DJS does not have the resources to focus on cases related exclusively to truancy; and (2) DJS perceives truancy as a family problem that is most appropriately addressed by MCPS. Statewide, very few youth are formally referred to Juvenile Court to have a child adjudicated as a Child in Need of Supervision.

Finding #12: Department of Health and Human Services staff collaborate with MCPS staff to address some of the root causes of truancy; DHHS does not, however, operate specific programs explicitly targeted at truancy prevention or reduction.

Two Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) service areas oversee DHHS’ programs that serve students who may have truancy problems – Children, Youth & Family Services, and Public Health Services. A staff member from each of these service areas plus a third staff member from DHHS’ Child & Adolescent Outpatient Mental Health Services serve on the Interagency Truancy Review Board. Five DHHS programs, listed in the chart below, provide services to students who may have truancy issues.

DHHS Service Area	Program Area(s)
Children, Youth & Family Services	Child Welfare Services Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Positive Youth Development Juvenile Justice Services Linkages to Learning
Public Health Services	School Health Services

DHHS staff in each program area work with MCPS in some way, however no DHHS program focuses specifically on truancy prevention or reduction.

- Child Welfare Services (CWS) works to protect children, including abused and neglected children by investigating allegations of child maltreatment, overseeing foster care and adoption in the County, and providing services for children and families in homes where abuse or neglect has occurred.
- DHHS' Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator oversees the County Government's youth gang prevention and intervention efforts "to prevent, neutralize, and control hostile behavior in high risk youth and youth gangs through the development of positive relationships between youth/community stakeholders and the outreach workers."
- Juvenile Justice Services (JJS) provides planning, coordination and support services for all juvenile justice activities in DHHS. JJS operates the Screening and Assessment Services for Children and Adolescents – which acts as a gateway for other DHHS mental health and substance abuse services for children and adolescents.
- Linkages to Learning is a school-based health and human services program that provides and/or refers students and families to mental health, health, social, and educational support services. In 2009, Linkages had 28 school-based sites (in seven middle schools; 20 elementary schools; and one cluster (the Kennedy Cluster).
- School Health Services (SHS) provides School Community Health Nurses (registered nurses) and School Health Room Aides (certified nursing assistants) to all public schools in Montgomery County. SHS nurses also staff six school-based Health/Wellness Centers that operate in five MCPS elementary schools and one high school and deliver health-related services through Linkages to Learning.

Finding #13: Housing Opportunities Commission staff (resident counselors) often work with students at high risk for truancy.

The Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) is Montgomery County's housing finance agency and its public housing authority. HOC provides housing for low-income, elderly, and disabled residents and an HOC staff member serves on the Interagency Truancy Review Board. Approximately 10,000 children live in HOC housing, and HOC staff estimate that approximately one third of students that come before the ITRB live in HOC housing.

HOC offers services to its residents, including resident counselors who will meet with a family if a child is referred to the ITRB. These counselors intervene in crises and refer HOC residents to available resources from other programs. HOC also operates Family Resource Centers at four HOC sites in the County (two in Gaithersburg, and one each in Olney and Germantown).

HOC staff report that HOC's participation on the ITRB provides some leverage with HOC students that come before the Board. Language both in HOC's leases and in contracts signed by families that receive federal housing vouchers allow for eviction and termination of a lease if someone in the household is convicted of a crime. Because parents of habitually truant students face possible criminal prosecution, HOC families can face eviction if a parent is convicted of a crime because of a child's habitual truancy. However, according to HOC staff, this has never occurred.

COMPARISON OF BEST PRACTICES AND LOCAL PRACTICES

This final section of findings examines how Montgomery County Public Schools' practices (as the lead agency in the County for designing and administering truancy prevention and reduction programs) align with the remaining four components of effective truancy programs: 1) use of data to target programs effectively; 2) developing school policies that promote attendance; 3) developing a comprehensive truancy reduction approach; and 4) evaluating programs.

Finding #14: MCPS' use of attendance data to identify students at risk for truancy partially aligns with best practices to use attendance, engagement, and achievement data for this task.

Best practices research recommends that schools use three types of data to identify students who are at risk of becoming habitually truant – data on student attendance, engagement (e.g., behavior), and academic achievement. MCPS recently demonstrated progress in this area by using attendance data to identify students at risk for habitual truancy. However, MCPS' overall use of data to identify students at greatest risk falls short of best practices because MCPS does not use either behavior or achievement data to identify students at greatest risk for truancy and dropping out.

At the start of this school year (2009-2010), MCPS began identifying students at risk for habitual truancy by identifying students with unexcused absence rates between 10 and 19 percent. The Office of School Performance shares this information monthly with school principals and pupil personnel workers.

Before this year, MCPS did not systematically identify students at risk for truancy (i.e., chronically absent students with high numbers of unexcused absences). Instead, MCPS' central office gave schools a list of students with absence rates (both excused and unexcused absences) of 20 percent or more. To identify students at risk for habitual truancy, school staff had to compare its students' records to these central office lists to identify students with high rates of *unexcused* absences.

While conducting interviews for this report, OLO learned of examples of practices in individual schools to identify students at-risk for truancy and dropping out that reflected recommended practices. Northwood High School's counseling team, for example, identifies incoming at-risk students through attendance, performance, and behavior data. As an intervention to preempt truancy, Northwood uses this information to target individual summer orientation meetings for these students and their parents with the 9th grade administrator to discuss their campus' expectations and resources.

Finding #15: MCPS' policies and practices partially align with best practices that recommend that school policies promote student attendance.

The National Center for Student Engagement recommends that schools ensure that their policies promote student attendance, engagement, and achievement to reduce truancy. Recommended practices include instituting and consistently applying effective attendance policies, eliminating "push-out policies" such as suspensions for truancy and automatic class failure for poor student attendance, notifying parents when absences occur, ensuring that teachers respect and support all students, and establishing welcoming and safe school environments.

Many of MCPS' policies and practices support student attendance. MCPS' supportive practices include the school system's efforts to:

- Foster awareness of its attendance policies;
- Contact parents after each absence;
- Increase parental involvement;
- Implement positive behavior supports; and
- Implement programs and activities that enhance student engagement, such as after-school programs and extra-curricular activities.

A recent change in state law that prohibits MCPS and other Maryland schools from giving students out-of-school suspensions for attendance offenses also aligns with best practices.

Some of MCPS' policies that impose sanctions for truancy, however, may work at cross purposes to school efforts to re-engage students and improve their attendance. MCPS' student attendance regulation (Regulation JEA-RA), for example, states that high school students with five or more unexcused absences in a class within a semester will lose credit for the class and receive a failing grade.

While perhaps creating an effective deterrent for accumulating unexcused absences, this loss-of-credit policy also offers truant high school students little incentive to return to class. MCPS' student attendance regulation also specifies that teachers have "no obligation" to help students with unlawful absences make up missed work. This policy contradicts the best practice of schools ensuring that teachers support even the most disengaged students and encourage them to return to class.

Finding #16: MCPS' use of a three-tiered strategy to prevent and reduce truancy partially aligns with the best practice of using a comprehensive approach to curb truancy.

Effective truancy programs focus simultaneously on prevention and intervention by implementing a three-tiered approach that offers: (a) school-wide efforts to prevent truancy, (b) targeted initiatives to improve attendance among at-risk students, and (c) intensive interventions to improve the attendance of habitual truants. Effective interventions for the highest risk students include case management and the use of a team of adults dedicated to mentoring and delivering intensive services to students and families.

MCPS' use of a three-tiered approach to prevent and reduce truancy aligns with best practices. Table 8-6 on the next page summarizes MCPS' three-tiered model.

Table 8-6. MCPS Three-Tier Framework for Curbing Truancy

Tier	Objectives	Interventions	Targets Students with Unlawful Absences Rates of...
1	Prevent truancy	Universal strategies and primary interventions for all students (e.g., school handbook; detention for truancy/tardiness; school staff/parent conferences; school attendance plans)	10% or less
2	Increase attendance among chronically absent students	Add targeted strategies and focused interventions for small groups and at-risk students (e.g., attendance contracts, mentors or buddies, wake-up calls, flexible schedules, home visits)	10 to 19%
3	Increase attendance among habitual truants	Add intensive targeted interventions for individual students with increased frequency and duration (e.g., pick up student, service referrals, school check-in/check-out, Truancy Review Board)	20% or higher

Sources: MCPS PPW Attendance Improvement Brochure and Problem Solving Guidelines

The intensity of MCPS' services in the second and third tiers, however, lags behind what the research describes as the most effective design of "comprehensive programs and services." For example, best practices research recommends targeting Tier 2 and 3 interventions to at-risk students through attendance, behavior, and achievement data, not MCPS' practice of only using attendance data to identify at-risk students. And, while MCPS staff report that every MCPS staff member is responsible for focusing on student improvement, MCPS relies on problem solving teams inclusive of staff with primary duties other than focusing on improving the outcomes of truant students instead of employing a second team of professionals to deliver intensive services to the highest risk students.

Finding #17: MCPS' limited evaluations of existing truancy reduction programs does not align with recommended best practices.

The best practices research indicates that effective truancy reduction programs establish concrete and measurable goals for program and student performance and that school systems monitor measures to identify opportunities for program improvement and to ensure that programs work as intended.

At the system-wide level, MCPS has neither developed performance measures nor evaluated the effectiveness of its truancy reduction strategies, except for the Interagency Truancy Review Board that addressed four percent of all truancy cases in 2009. OLO's review of ITRB data suggests that while the ITRB leads to improved attendance its effectiveness is limited since nearly half of all students continued to be chronically absent or habitually truant.

MCPS' strategic plan calls for each school to meet or exceed local and state standards for attendance (i.e., a 94 percent attendance rate in 2009). Monitoring progress on this standard, however, is insufficient for tracking truancy or evaluating the effectiveness of truancy programs.

Recently, MCPS began tracking specific interventions delivered to habitually truant students. With the establishment of specific performance measures, these data could help MCPS evaluate the effectiveness of its truancy reduction efforts and problem solving approaches (i.e., the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) process and/or Educational Management Teams) on student attendance.

Chapter IX: Recommended Discussion Issues

This report responds to the Council’s request for the Office of Legislative Oversight to examine truancy within Montgomery County Public Schools, interagency efforts in the County to address habitual truancy, and best practices for curbing truancy. The four recommended discussion issues outlined in this chapter are based on the results of OLO’s study. In sum, OLO found that:

- State law defines habitual truancy and the sanctions for truancy in the County. State regulation defines habitual truancy as an unexcused absence rate of 20 percent or more within a school year, semester, or marking period. State law allows the prosecution of parents, but not students, for truancy.
- The magnitude of habitual truancy in the County is relatively low. In 2009, less than one percent of all MCPS students were truant habitually. However, the high threshold for defining habitual truancy in MCPS combined with the exclusion of some dropouts and mobile students from data counts may underestimate the magnitude of truancy in MCPS.
- Local truancy prevention and intervention practices partially align with recommended best practices. Of note, MCPS’ focus on improving school climates and practice of notifying parents of student absences align with best practices, while the limited collaboration across County agencies and limited evaluations of existing truancy reduction programs do not.

Discussion Issue #1: The merits and drawbacks to lowering the threshold for “habitual truancy” in MCPS and using factors other than attendance to identify students at risk for truancy.

The evidenced-based research identifies student attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement¹ as three risk factors for habitual truancy. MCPS uses only one of these factors – student attendance – to identify students at risk for habitual truancy. Further, MCPS’ attendance threshold for identifying habitually truant students is higher than its threshold for denying students credit for high school courses due to unexcused absences (its “loss-of-credit” policy).

MCPS uses the State of Maryland’s threshold – unexcused absences 20 percent or more of the time – to identify habitually truant students. A 2005 survey by the Education Commission of the States shows that this definition is one of the highest among the 15 states surveyed. Under state law, MCPS could set a lower threshold for identifying habitually truant students.

MCPS identifies students at risk for habitual truancy when students have unexcused absences 10 percent or more of the time. MCPS, however, also has a written policy that students in grades 9-12 who miss five or more sessions of a class in a semester for “unlawful” (unexcused) reasons will lose credit for the class and receive a failing grade.

By the time MCPS targets high school students for truancy interventions, those students may have already lost credit in one or more classes under the school system’s loss-of-credit policy and may have very little motivation to return to class. In 2008, 23 percent of all MCPS 9th graders lost credit for one or more classes in their first semester, with 39-41 percent of black and Latino 9th graders losing credit.

¹ “Engagement” refers to the connectedness or attachment that students feel toward school.

OLO recommends that the Council discuss the following with MCPS representatives during worksession:

- a. Has MCPS ever considered adopting a threshold for habitual truancy that is lower than the State's definition – that is, student with unexcused absences 20 percent or more of the time?
- b. What are the arguments for and against identifying students at-risk for habitual truancy based on factors other than attendance?
- c. How do/could MCPS' efforts to reduce its loss of credit rates and increase academic eligibility in high school square with efforts for identifying and addressing the needs of students at highest risk for truancy?

Discussion Issue #2: Additional opportunities for systemic collaboration across agencies to address truancy.

One of the best practices identified in the research as effective for addressing truancy is interagency collaboration. Joint efforts to improve student attendance recommended by the research include:

- Community-level programs involving local law enforcement that establish protocols for community members to report non-attendance and for escorting students back to school;
- Juvenile courts that impose a variety of sanctions on non-attending youth, such as community service, denied driving privileges, and required school attendance of parents/guardians; and
- Information sharing agreements among agencies that reduce service duplication for multiple-issue youth and families.

Recurring themes of OLO's interviews with agency staff were the need for greater interagency collaboration and the need to target services to at-risk students as early as possible (i.e., before high school). Staff also identified legal obstacles that inhibit non-school agency personnel's (e.g., law enforcement) ability to impact school attendance, particularly among secondary students.

The approaching launch of a Truancy Court Program in two MCPS middle schools represents a step in the desired direction – a partnership between the University of Baltimore School of Law, MCPS, and the State's Attorney's Office to implement a nationally recognized model for improving student attendance. The University actively encourages participation in the program by other agencies (e.g., law enforcement, juvenile services, health and human services) to systemically work together to improve attendance among students at risk for habitual truancy.

To encourage greater collaboration across agencies to reduce truancy within the County, OLO recommends the Council discuss the following with agency representatives during worksession:

- a. Are there ways to use the Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB) as a forum for increased collaboration among the participating agencies to address truancy?
- b. What sorts of programs or strategies are best implemented across agencies?
- c. If/when additional resources become available, what would be your highest priority strategies or programs to implement to increase school attendance?

Discussion Issue #3: Enhancing incentives for truant students to attend school regularly.

Best practices research has found that effective truancy reduction programs promote attendance, foster student attachment to school, and emphasize achievement. Effective programs typically focus both on prevention and intervention. One recommended intervention is that schools provide alternative ways for students to re-engage in school.

MCPS uses a three-tier system of interventions to prevent and reduce truancy. The second tier of interventions is designed to improve the attendance of chronically absent students. The third tier is designed to get habitually truant students to return to school on a regular basis or to continue their educations in alternative environments. OLO found, however, that the intensity of MCPS' second and third tier services likely lags behind researchers' recommendations for successful interventions.

In OLO's interviews for this report, a recurring recommendation voiced by staff across agencies is that MCPS bolster its efforts to re-engage truant students in school. Specific recommendations for change included:

- Expand access to career and technology education paths and programs, including the Thomas Edison High School of Technology, which currently limits access for students with below average attendance and academic achievement; and
- Expand the capacity of alternative programs to better serve habitually truant students.

One best practice already used in several MCPS high schools is career academies that feature small learning communities with career-related curricula, academic coursework, work experience, and partnerships with local employers to improve student performance. MCPS, however, limits most access to hands-on instruction in these programs to students performing at-grade level or above.

Other recommended best practices for consideration include targeting truancy in middle schools, providing additional academic and behavioral supports to at-risk students, and using specialized teams of adults to provide intensive wrap-around services for habitually truant students.

OLO recommends that the Council discuss the following with MCPS during worksession:

- a. Are there ways to expand access to MCPS' alternative education and career technology programs to chronically absent or truant students?
- b. To what extent do MCPS' current Level 1 and 2 alternative programs address the needs of habitually truant students?
- c. How successful have the alternative programs been at increasing student attendance among truant students?

Discussion Issue #4: Evaluating the effectiveness of MCPS' truancy intervention programs.

Another best practice identified by the research is the use of performance measures and program evaluations to assess the effectiveness of truancy reduction programs and to identify opportunities for improvement. Except for tracking attendance data among students whose cases have been heard by the Interagency Truancy Review Board (which accounts for 4 percent of all truancy cases), there have been no formal evaluations of the County's truancy prevention or reduction strategies.

To fully understand the effectiveness of efforts to address truancy, an evaluation of truancy intervention programs is needed. For example, an evaluation of MCPS' Collaborative Problem Solving process and Educational Management Teams could demonstrate whether these approaches impact student attendance and whether alternative approaches are warranted.

Recently, MCPS began tracking specific interventions delivered to habitually truant students. In the future, this data could help MCPS evaluate the effectiveness of its truancy reduction efforts.

OLO recommends the Council discuss the following with agency representatives during worksession:

- a. How does MCPS currently assess the effectiveness of its efforts to prevent and/or reduce truancy?
- b. How feasible would it be to develop systemwide performance goals for truancy reduction programs and develop a plan for conducting a formal evaluation of program effectiveness?
- c. In what ways could an evaluation of MCPS' truancy reduction efforts inform the school system's dropout prevention efforts?

Chapter X: Agency Comments on Final Draft

The Office of Legislative Oversight circulated a final draft of this report to the Chief Operating Officer of Montgomery County Public Schools, the Assistant Chief Administrative Officer for Montgomery County, the Montgomery County State's Attorney, the Executive Director of the Housing Opportunities Commission, and the County Supervisor in the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. OLO appreciates the time taken by agency representatives to review the draft report and provide comments. OLO's final report incorporates technical corrections provided by agency staff.

The written comments received from the Deputy Superintendent of Schools for Montgomery County Public Schools and from the Chief Administrative Officer of the Montgomery County Government are attached in their entirety, beginning on the following page.



February 19, 2010

Dr. Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst
Ms. Leslie Rubin, Legislative Analyst
Office of Legislative Oversight
Stella B. Werner Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Dr. Bonner-Tompkins and Ms. Rubin:

Thank you for providing Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff with the opportunity to review and comment on the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Report on Truancy in Montgomery County. Comments and suggestions for technical changes were previously provided. MCPS staff members who participated in the review appreciated the collaborative process used throughout the development and review of this report. The data and findings will help in our ongoing, collaborative interagency efforts to reduce and prevent truancy in Montgomery County.

It is evident that much of the feedback provided by MCPS throughout the development of the report was carefully considered and incorporated into the draft. The following comments on the completed draft are included below:

- As evidenced in your report, there is much to celebrate as MCPS continues its efforts to address the issue of truancy. Between 2006 and 2009, habitual truancy of students in MCPS declined by 5 percent and the rate of chronic absenteeism declined by 17 percent. These are substantial decreases. MCPS' habitual truancy rate for Fiscal Year 2009 was 0.7 percent, considerably less than the rate in Maryland of 2.8 percent. MCPS' 0.7 percent habitual truancy rate compares very favorably with similarly sized jurisdictions in Maryland—Prince Georges County (9.6 percent), Baltimore County (1.9 percent), and Anne Arundel County (0.8 percent). Local jurisdictions with lower habitual truancy rates, Frederick County (0.6 percent) and Howard County (0.3 percent), enroll fewer than half of the students in MCPS.
- The MCPS Department of Student Services (DSS) is collaborating with the MCPS Office of Shared Accountability to develop a system to capture highly mobile students. The report clarifies that students may not be identified as truant due to the fact that they are not enrolled in a single school for 91 or more days. Although the attendance rates for these students are currently monitored at the school level, the data system now in development will ensure a system-level review of every student.

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- State guidelines dictate how attendance is reported for secondary students, specifically those students who “skip” or are tardy to individual class periods. Instances of skipping a class and arriving tardy to class are monitored by teachers. Following MCPS procedures, three unexcused instances of tardiness equal one unexcused absence. School teams do specifically intervene with students who skip a class or who arrive tardy to develop interventions to encourage improved class attendance.
- While it is acknowledged that there is not a system-level, truancy-specific work group, there are multiple concentrated MCPS efforts that address the five correlates to truancy identified in the report (suspensions, ineligibility, loss of credit, grade retention, and dropout). MCPS has engaged in the M-Stat process for several years. M-Stat is a comprehensive process that provides ongoing access to quantifiable evidence of student progress toward identified key targets and a forum for in-depth analysis and action planning. M-Stat teams are focused on both suspension and ineligibility. MCPS created a Graduation Rate Project Team to recommend policies, procedures, and strategies to increase graduation rates and decrease the dropout rates for all students. Finally, a Loss of Credit Work Group is examining all aspects of the current loss of credit policy and developing recommendations to assist schools in reducing the number of students who lose credit due to excessive unexcused absences. Through the comprehensive efforts of these work groups, MCPS will continue to positively affect truancy in the county, resulting in improved student performance.
- The statement, “Pupil Personnel Workers (PPWs) often serve as the primary staff for mitigating truancy,” does not take into full account the numerous interventions implemented at the school level before a PPW becomes involved. Table 5-8, “Summary of Montgomery County Truancy Intervention Process” (page 44), identifies no fewer than eight actions that school-based staff members can, and do, engage in before referring a case to the PPW.

School staff members are expected to develop and implement interventions when attendance issues first arise. These early interventions are consistent with the tiered level of service delivery established in MCPS, and are most often implemented by a teacher, school counselor, school nurse, or other school-based staff member who has a relationship with the student and/or family. These interventions are in place prior to making a request for more intense support, like that provided by a PPW.

The report includes a statement regarding “Delays by schools in referring students to the Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB).” MCPS believes that this perceived delay is actually the appropriate use of early interventions in the attempt to ameliorate the attendance concern at the lowest and most personal level. Schools are expected to be in frequent communication with parents to inform them and problem solve with them about their child’s attendance. Additionally, school staff members work directly with the student and family to build relationships, implement interventions, and create contracts

with incentives to further encourage the student to attend school more regularly. It is only after these interventions are implemented and there is no significant improvement in attendance that cases are moved to the more intensive levels of PPW involvement. If attendance does not improve, a referral is then appropriately made to the ITRB.

The ITRB attendance improvement data (Table 5-9, page 45) do not fully capture the improvement most students display because of the cumulative effect of the student's absences. For example, a student who demonstrates a 50 percent attendance record through the first quarter of the year, and raises their attendance level to 85 percent for the second quarter, would still have an overall semester attendance rate well under the 80 percent threshold because of the cumulative effects of the first quarter absences. DSS is developing a data collection model which will capture and record attendance data immediately before and after the family participates in the ITRB process. This tool will allow the ITRB to more easily note attendance improvements and can be used in making the decision to recommend a student/family to the Assistant State's Attorney.

- Table 7-4, "Description of OJJDP Truancy Reduction Demonstration Projects" (page 71), delineates numerous key program features found in the six identified demonstration projects. We are pleased to note that the majority of the key program features are already incorporated into MCPS's efforts to reduce truancy as follows:
 - Presentations to parents groups on the importance of school attendance
 - PPW case management of the most challenging cases
 - Schoolwide interventions with attendance rewards
 - Educational Facilities Officers (EFO) in high schools
 - Attendance contracts developed at the school and ITRB level
 - *Check In/Check Out* systems for chronically absent students (in schools implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS))

Additional enhancements that align with these key program features could be easily incorporated into current MCPS practices as follows:

- Use the "10% Unexcused Absence" report in regular school-based team "data chat" meetings
- Increase referrals and collaboration with community agencies

MCPS acknowledges that increasing early outreach to parents around issues of school attendance has the potential to further reduce chronic absenteeism.

MCPS offers the following comments on four findings included in the report:

- **Finding #2: The Maryland State Department of Education's method for counting habitually truant students excludes students enrolled for fewer than 91 days in the same school.**

Official counts in every Maryland school system, including MCPS, would be higher if these students were included.

- **Finding #17: MCPS' limited evaluations of existing truancy reduction programs does not align with best practices.**

MCPS demonstrated significant progress in reducing the truancy rate and the rate of chronic absenteeism. We acknowledge the opportunity for improvement in the evaluation of truancy reduction interventions and agree that there are ways to effectively capture data that would identify and address highly mobile students who have attendance issues. DSS is collaborating with the MCPS Office of Shared Accountability to develop evaluative measures that specifically address current efforts to reduce truancy, particularly those which occur at lower levels than ITRB referrals. We will identify a way to more clearly report attendance data for those students who move between schools frequently.

- **Finding #7: MCPS acts as the lead agency in preventing and reducing truancy. The Interagency Truancy Review Board is the only formal interagency activity explicitly designed to address truancy.**

Truancy is most often a symptom of broader issues that reflect more intense needs of the student and/or family. MCPS is engaged in several interagency collaborations that either directly, or indirectly, impact student attendance and truancy as follows:

- The Kennedy Cluster Project, whose purpose is to support children, families, and communities so that student achievement is no longer predictable by social determinants such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, is highlighted in the report.
- All schools have the opportunity to work with the Montgomery County Collaboration Council's Local Access Mechanism (LAM) to support families in obtaining intensive mental health services.
- MCPS is a key partner in Linkages to Learning, a program to deliver mental health services, prevention programming, and social services to students and families in 28 school communities.
- MCPS is a gatekeeper agency working collaboratively with Interagency Family Preservation Services (IFPS). IFPS is an intensive, short-term program that combines the wraparound process with Parent-Child Therapy to offer families opportunities to develop and access comprehensive community-based supports and support the development of parenting skills.

- o DSS works with the Montgomery County Collaboration Council to develop Tier III intensive wraparound supports for students through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.
- **Finding #16: MCPS' use of a three-tiered strategy to prevent and reduce truancy partially aligns with the best practice of using a comprehensive approach to curb truancy.**


The correlates to truancy identified in this report, including behavioral and achievement data, are considered throughout the tiered problem-solving model implemented in every school. Targeted interventions are identified and implemented in each tier. The effectiveness of each intervention is documented and evaluated, using the newly developed MCPS Form 272-10: *Documentation of Interventions*. All staff members in MCPS have the primary duty of improving student outcomes, including attendance.

MCPS is concerned about the recommendation to assign case managers whose sole responsibility is to address truancy. This recommendation is in conflict with the MCPS tiered service delivery model that builds on the relationships established within school teams and with students and families.

The collaborative problem solving team may identify a member to serve as the "case manager." In accordance with this process, we respectfully do not agree that the appointment of an external case manager is a best practice that would significantly impact attendance and truancy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to review and respond to the findings and recommendations. Although I am pleased with the progress the school system has made in reducing the truancy and chronic absenteeism rates, I agree that we must always reflect upon and improve our practices. I believe our collaborative work will only enhance the services we provide to the students and families of Montgomery County.

Sincerely,



Frieda K. Lacey, Ed.D.
Deputy Superintendent of Schools

FKL:gh

Copy to:

Dr. Weast
Mrs. Richardson

Mr. Neff
Mr. Zagami



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND 20850

Isiah Leggett
County Executive

MEMORANDUM

February 23, 2010

TO: Karen Orlansky, Director
Office of Legislative Oversight

FROM: Timothy L. Firestine 
Chief Administrative Officer

RE: OLO Report 2010-7, Truancy Report in Montgomery County

We appreciate the opportunity to review the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) report on Truancy in Montgomery County and the inclusion of cross departmental issues in that report. The report provides important information on truancy and methods to address it.

As the recommendations largely lie within the purview of the Board of Education, we have very few comments. Discussion Issue # 2 entitled "*Additional opportunities for systemic collaboration across agencies to address truancy*" and its sub-items are the only items that have relevance for County Government and we offer our comments below.

OLO Language

To encourage greater collaboration across agencies to reduce truancy within the County, OLO recommends the Council discuss the following with agency representatives during work session: Are there ways to use the Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB) as a forum for increased collaboration among the participating agencies to address truancy?

Response

The scope and capacity of the ITRB would need to be reviewed to determine if this group could address broader issues in addition to the direct review of students. This additional burden may cause fewer students to be reviewed by the panel and this is not desirable. It may be possible for the group to identify trends and raise issues to another body that may take action on increasing collaboration. Ideally, each high school cluster could develop a multi-agency team to periodically review and staff chronically truant students in their cluster. The Kennedy Cluster Project is an example of such a model.

OLO Language

What sorts of programs or strategies are best implemented across agencies?

Response

The strategy of information sharing is one that has merit and has precedence in the Kennedy Cluster and other initiatives. This practice is helpful in creating comprehensive approaches to address the needs of students and their families and in intervening earlier when students have issues. It is critical that students' privacy be protected and that the purpose for sharing information be very clear if this avenue is pursued. The Kennedy Cluster Project has developed a Memorandum of Understanding among key partners that addresses these issues and could be used as a template. Programs that reflect interagency cooperation and are effective in engaging youth in positive activities and increasing their connectedness to school include: After school programs, Sports Academies, the Street Outreach Network, Linkages to Learning, and Regional Youth Services Centers. The Screening and Assessment Services for Children and Adolescents (SASCA) program provides assessments and referrals for students identified by the schools, and is a gateway for students to become engaged in the programs mentioned above.

OLO Language

If/when additional resources become available, what would be your highest priority strategies or programs to implement to increase school attendance?

Response

The strategies we would support that are within the purview of County Government include: (1) increased support for Excel Beyond the Bell, including capacity building; (2) training and direct funding of out-of-school time programs; and (3) increased staffing capacity to coordinate activities and information sharing; and support for school-based services, especially those that support and engage families. The Kennedy Cluster Project model can be replicated in other high school clusters with additional funding to support case managers and infrastructure.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this study. The success and safety of our youth are priorities for our County and their engagement in school is a critical ingredient to ensure both of these goals. We look forward to future discussions on this issue.

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